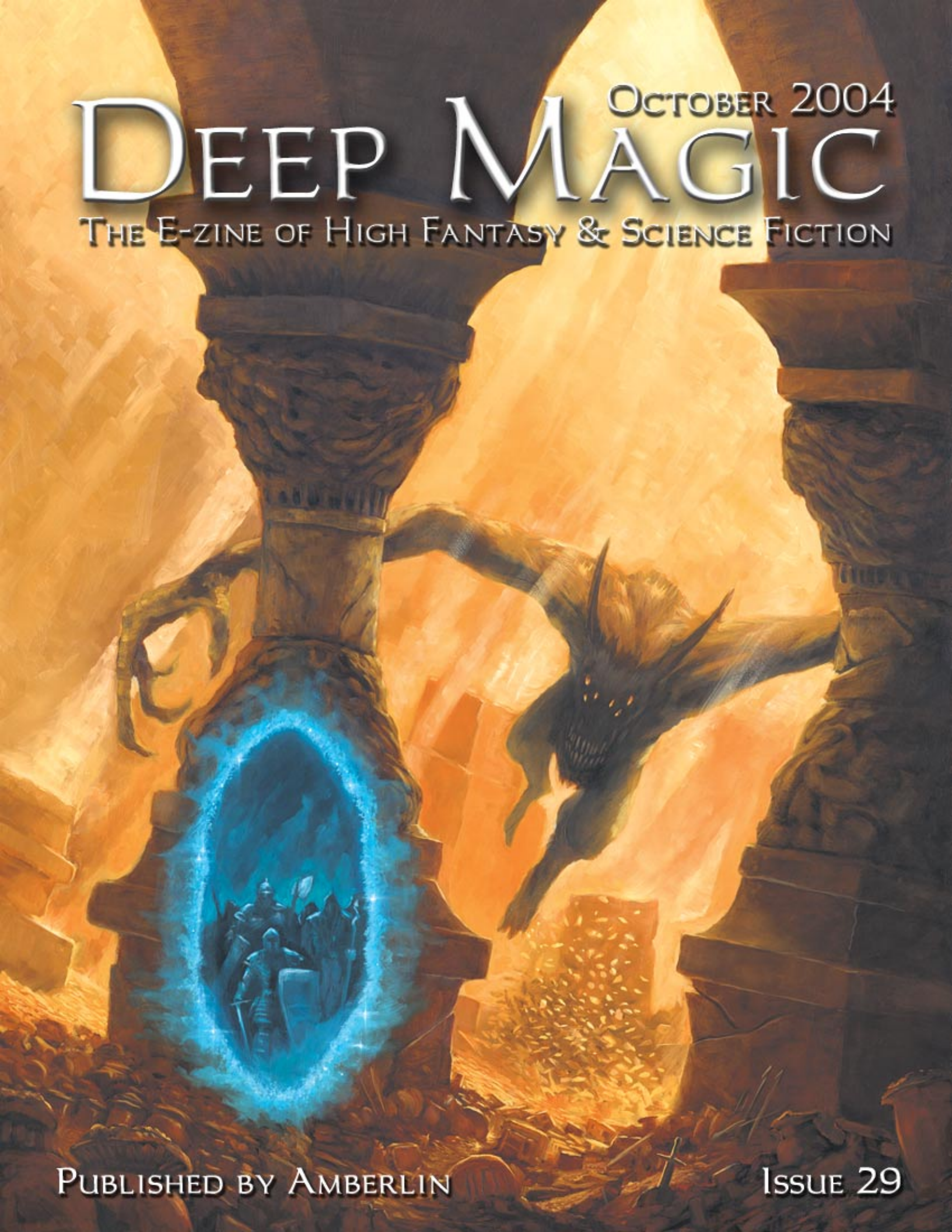
October 2004
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"*Hall of Panes*"

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October 2004

Hurricanes, Hurricanes, Hurricanes – can anyone say Hurricane season? We hope those readers affected by the string of meteorological weather patterns (including members of our staff) are recovering. Tell us your stories, if you have any.

We had a wonderful response to our Writing Challenge this last month. We challenged our readers to describe the "assassins" of the world of Kenatos. We received our own storm of responses from you. In fact, there were so many good ones that we actually picked two to officially instate into the mythos of Kenatos. But this also segues into an announcement regarding the writing challenges.

Because many of our readers are not waiting to download Deep Magic on the first of the month, we have wondered if even more would participate if we extended the deadline. We decided to experiment with this and see what happens. From now on, writing challenge submissions will be published a month later than usual. This means the writing challenge given in this issue (October) will be published in the December issue. The deadline for entries will be the 10th of the month (November 10th in this case). This means we will either get more submissions of higher quality (since you all will have more time to proofread your own work now), or it will prove that most writers are procrastinators anyway, and we will receive the same amount late in the month of November. A little friendly humor here, folks.

Another bit of exciting news involves a new format for Deep Magic. You can now download the e-zine in Palm eReader format, compatible with most handheld devices. Go to the regular downloads page and pull down our new PocketDM! We welcome any feedback you may have regarding this new version of Deep Magic.

We like to dedicate the October issue to more dark fantasy stories. Fear is the theme of the month, both in sci-fi and fantasy fiction. Cover artist Richard Sardinha brings us "Hall of Panes" this month in another spectacular cover. We did receive a few horror submissions that were quite good, but we had to reject them because they were not exactly in the high fantasy or science fiction genres. So, let us kick off the October issue with M. Thomas' *Carrying Souls*. Next, we bring you *Jagwog*, the tale of an undead massive ape-like monster. Not every day do we have stories from a point of view like this. We then venture into the sickness that werewolves suffer in *Scent of Evil*. Then Mike Loos has brought us an intense sci-fi story, *Deletion*. On a lighter note, we bring *Consolation of Philosophy,* which just may prove to you that you don't exist. And since it is baseball season, we had to share a special tribute to the masters of the game – in a fantasy setting – with *Big Man and the Shadow*.

Also in this issue you will find an interview with Dragonlance author Dan Willis and the artwork of Carolina Eade. Brendon Taylor then finishes off the issue with an expose on all things fearful in his article "Creating Suspense."

Enjoy the issue! And don't forget, there will be no writing challenge results posted in November. Look for them in December's issue.

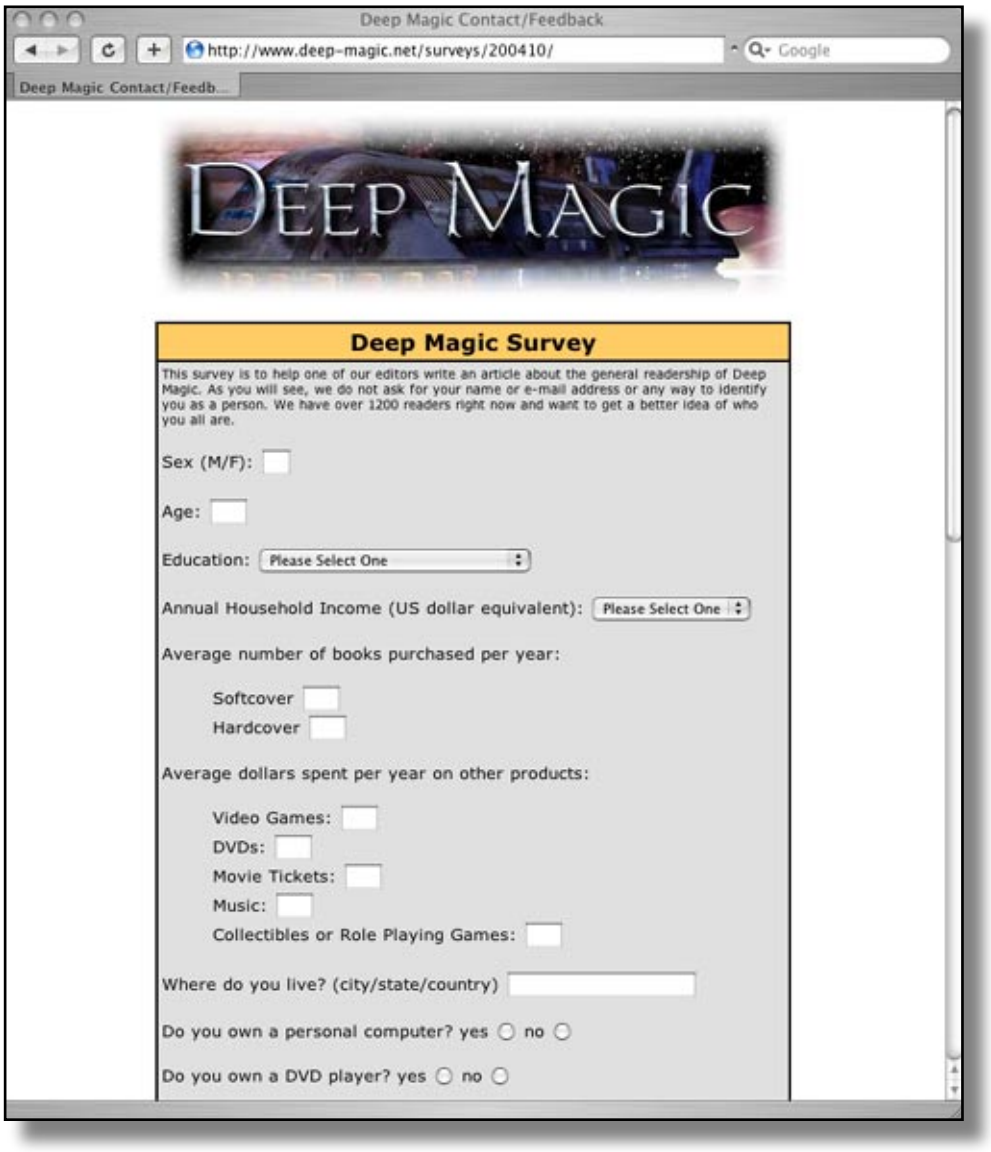
All the best,
The Editors

Safe Places for Minds to Wander

Deep Magic Reader Survey

One of the editors of Deep Magic would like your input for an article. You read Deep Magic because you enjoy fantasy and science fiction. But what makes a person try out a new author, or stay with that author novel after novel? There are so many new books that come out, one cannot possibly keep track of it all. So how do you do it?

There are a growing number of subscribers to Deep Magic. We would like you to fill out a brief survey to help us get to know you better—anonymously anyway. We won't ask for your name or e-mail address or any way to identify you with a response. The survey results will only be used for some statistical analysis for the purpose of the article which will be published in December's issue. We welcome your participation by clicking here. It should take no more than 5 minutes.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Hardcover
Average dollars spent per year on other products:
Video Games:
DVDs:
Movie Tickets:
Music:
Collectibles or Role Playing Games:
Where do you live? (city/state/country)
Do you own a personal computer? yes no
Do you own a DVD player? yes no

Writing Challenge

Each month, Deep Magic offers an opportunity and a challenge for our readers who are also writers. Whether you are a novice who has never written a fictional paragraph, or a veteran of the publishing business, you are welcome to participate. These challenges are designed to help you develop your writing talents. As incentive, or by way of warning, we select a small number of submissions each month for publication. ***Keep in mind that our writing challenge pieces are not edited and are usually written by amateur writers.***

To submit a challenge, go to our new online submissions system. You will need to create an author profile and account. **We have a new due date for Writing Challenge submissions!** Submissions are due by the following month on the 10th (for example, a challenge found in a June issue would be due by July 10th and published in the August issue).

October 2004 Writing Challenge

With the holiday season approaching, it's time to turn our attention with the Kenatos project to the holidays and traditions that will fill the world. So that's the challenge this month. Create a holiday/tradition for Kenatos. This holiday/tradition can center around the end of the year, beginning of the year, summer/autumn solstice, midwinter...whenever you'd like. It can be a religious holiday or an annual secular event. Give us detail and make your entry rich with flavor. Provide the history, or myth, surrounding the holiday or tradition. Don't forget, too, about the new writing challenge timeline. You have until Nov 10, nearly six weeks, to get your entry to us. (Yes, that is a firm deadline.) Every entry we publish in the December issue will be an official part of the Kenatos world.

Selections from the September 2004 Writing Challenge

The following two selections were chosen to be the official Assassins of Kenatos

Path to Ascension Part 1
Wrivenent

Other Entries

The Muertiati
The Order of Fang and Claw
The Meztrah

The above stories were selected from the submissions we received this last month. As a refresher, here is the writing challenge from last month:

The world of Kenatos is the home for many races and professions. In previous challenges, you have added to the myths and complexities of the world. In this month's issue of Deep Magic, author Jeff Wheeler left a gaping hole in his story Silvandom. Missy Grove was attacked by a mysterious man, an "assassin" sent to spy on her. Only a few sparse clues were provided about this incident. The challenge this month is to develop more fully the dark side of the city. Appropriately timed for printing in October's special 'dark fantasy' issue, the challenge is to come up with your version of Kenatos' assassins and the ties that bind them, as well as a new name for them. Frighten us with your creativity, but keep it within our "safe places" standards. The best entry will be selected by our editors as the official "assassin class" for the Kenatos project.

Path to Ascension (Part 1)

By Ally Wrenn

To those on the outside, who did not know the ways of the dark, they were merely assassins, working for the gold of the rich or those who could afford to pay their price, making an honest living, unlike *thieves*. Associating an assassin with a thief was like calling a priest of Seitherell a barbarian of Boeotia. And to bill them as common murderers was worse than accusing said priest of sacrilege. They were the kremtau—the Cunning Skillful.

Imoirk stood witness to the proceedings, schooling her features to hide the rage building up inside. Tamlan was enjoying her twin's misery far too much. He would pay.

Tamlan grinned as the leader of ceremonies, the Rite, began the ritual of silencing. A slight shiver ran through Imoirk's veins. She imagined she felt the cold blade as it sliced through her twin's tongue, sealing Kriomi's fate as a Silent One. Blood poured, and Kriomi writhed before the Witnessed in pain, but she did not cry out, and no tear fell from her eye. Pride for Kriomi welled up inside Imoirk's heart. Her sister had shown the courage of the kremtau, though she'd failed the first test on her path to Ascension.

But Kriomi had made it to the path. The Lost, those who had failed all the Trials to the path, were banished from the kremtau never to return, or sacrificed if the association felt they'd made it too far and knew too many secrets. Those who made it to the path, but did not pass all the tests, were sentenced to be a Silent One. Always working for the higher ranks, but never allowed to move up. Still, they were respected, and not to be underestimated—their silence making them all the more valuable.

Those with the skills to heal helped Kriomi rise and began to treat her wound, stuffing a cloth soaked in herbs into her mouth. Another man stepped into the moonlight, grasping a withered oak branch, and began murmuring. He circled her once and then bowed to the Rite. It was done. Kriomi had been initiated as a Silent One. Imoirk hid her hate as Tamlan glanced her way and smirked. He thought she would be next. Ever since they'd made it to the path, he'd been their gainsayer.

"I *will* see your tattoo," she vowed, too softly for anyone to hear but herself. It was the greatest threat from one kremtau to another, as the tattoo only appeared after death and told those who knew what to look for the clan, rank, and other secrets, secrets she would learn once she finished her Ascension.

The Witnessed began to disperse, quietly and discreetly. Some remained, conducting business or issuing orders. The healers would take Kriomi to a room specially prepared for her to recover. She would be allowed no visitors, for now it was her time of choosing. Of course, it meant that those cunning and skillful enough would attempt to visit Kriomi and solicit her to their clan. Imoirk caught her sister's eye in the moonlight and an unspoken thought passed between them. She nodded. She would find out Tamlan's clan and inform Kriomi.

Imoirk edged her way out of the empty warehouse by the Shipyards. She donned her travel cloak that she'd removed for the ceremony and made her way back into the city proper. Dawn was beginning to wax in the distant east, giving the black night a grayer shade. She covertly glanced back to be sure Tamlan wasn't following. He was her overseer, and she would have to choose her method of testing soon—her targets and her employer—and make the proper arrangements. After that she would face two more tests.

Tamlan turned her stomach, but as he was one of the Teaching Guild, she was forced to obey and be led by him. Guild superceded all clans. Each clan had their own rules, their own rites and rituals, and their own secrets, but all answered to the Guild's laws and all the kremtau were sanctioned and trained by the Teaching Guild.

Imoirk hurried along the nearly deserted streets as dawn crested the city's edge and gave a cheery light. A movement caught in the corner of her eye caused her to instinctively duck and roll. She rose, back to the nearest building, scanning the streets. A knife protruded from a barrel beside her. She saw him almost instantly. Tamlan stood by stacked crates. Barely suppressing a scowl, she waited.

"Well done, pet," Tamlan's smooth voice rolled off his tongue. "You may pass your first test of Ascension yet." He ambled toward her.

Pausing no more than a hand's breadth away, he removed the knife from the barrel while he spoke.

"Have you chosen?" he mumbled under his breath, which stunk of spiced meat.

Imoirk didn't move, her stomach revolting in disgust as she tried to keep the obvious loathing from her voice. "Yes. Nine days hence. Beneath the Dryad's Den at moonrise."

She wanted to slap the condescending smile from his face.

"Very good, pet." He backed away and into the remaining shadows. "It will be fun now that your sister is eligible for the Great Game. The pair of you as Silent Ones will be interesting. You must hurry home now, before your beloved awakens."

Imoirk's muscles tensed, but she bowed submissively, as was custom, and waited until he had left. Only then did she sprint for home, letting her anger fuel her, reckless in who might see her.

Before her door, she stopped, hand paused on the door. She'd forgotten about the Great Game. For Tamlan to mention it would mean the time was approaching. She would have to be certain to complete her Ascension by then. The Great Game, where clans went against one another, overseen by The Seven of the Game Guild- the only ones untouchable during the Great Game, and all but one, Silent Ones. She would have to work faster if she expected to survive.

With a heavy sigh, she nudged open the door. It made no noise. Imoirk crept in and up the stairs to her rooms. She would have to rise in a few hours to open the shop and serve bread to the customers at the bakery. Before going to her room, she peered into a small one off the hallway. A little girl with curly, red-brown hair snuggled closer to her doll. Imoirk smiled. She no longer worried as much. The Teaching Guild watched over her daughter while she could not, and when she'd passed her tests of Ascension, her clan would do the same.

Wrivenent

By Mike Loos

Siyras approached the temple from the south side, creeping along the narrower alleyways where the stifling heat of the day had persisted even as darkness blanketed the city. Most of the houses in the area were dark and in poor repair, but the pervasive stench of sewage and unwashed bodies dispelled any notion that they were abandoned. Mixed with the amateur cut-throats, drunks and thieves were thousands of the common laborers that propelled the never-ending growth of the Arch-Rike's temple, its forbidding stone walls looming like an overlord over its lowly charges beneath.

Crouching in the shadows, Siyras gazed upward, watching the sentries complete their latest watch along the top of the outer wall. As the soldiers passed from view, he leapt from his hiding place onto the surface of the wall, his fingertips scrambling to find a narrow crevice to hang onto as he clung to the rock. The granite was slick and wet from an earlier rainstorm, so it took all of Siyras' considerable skill to ascend quickly without losing his grip. At the top, he hauled himself over the parapet and dropped onto the wide walkway between the watchtowers. Siyras could hear the rattle of the soldiers' armor as they made the turn from the guard tower, but he was down the battlement staircase before they came into view.

The inner grounds of the temple were nearly deserted as the hour approached midnight. Siyras moved noiselessly through the darkness, taking advantage of the deep shadows cast onto the lower bailey by the immense towers that launched into the stormy sky. He crept up a series of stone steps that led to the upper grounds, his eyes locating the base of Trispur Tower mixed among the smaller structures. Siyras spotted a small stand of trees that formed a dense foliage around one side of the tower's base. He closed his eyes, recalling the impressions placed in his memory by the master. By comparing the images to what he saw before him, he knew that this was the place he was sent to find.

Laying hidden amidst the darkness, Siyras noticed that he was not the only one watching the trees at the base of the tower. Across the courtyard, an archer was perched on the rooftop of the barracks, surveying the entire western end of the square.

So I am expected.

Siyras readied himself to move, but first had to ensure that he would not be seen. He entered a trance, which extended his awareness outward, reaching beyond his current surroundings to the watcher on the roof. He easily connected to the young man's defenseless mind and penetrated his consciousness. Siyras could see through his eyes; he could hear the sounds that the sniper heard. Isolating the insignificant moments between the blinking of the man's eyes, Siyras *joined* a subsequent set of these idle periods together, creating a brief loop. As long as the soldier continued to stare forward, he would see the same images over and over, effectively blinding him. If he looked away or closed his eyes, the spell would be broken. If he heard a sound, the trance would end. So Siyras knew he had to move swiftly. He leapt from his hiding place, sprinting across the square. Once Siyras reached the brushwood, he slid back under cover.

Behind the trees, a deep trench sloped down along the foundation of the tower. The trench was barely the width of two men, but shored with small bricks and braced with thick

timber. There were no guards. Several spans down the path, Siyras could see the faint glimmer of torchlight escaping from a large wooden door at the bottom. The door appeared to have been cracked open ever so slightly, a sign that he had been told to expect. He descended the path carefully, drawing overhead one of the narrow blades strapped to his back. He readied himself while pushing the door open slowly.

* * *

"The weapon will not be necessary, wrivenent. I assure you that I have none of your talent with the blade."

Siyras heard the priest as soon as he saw him. The dark-haired cleric stood unmoving in the center of the large chamber that Siyras entered. He was wearing a black cassock and a simple white surplice vestment with few other raiments that would indicate his rank. Siyras eyed him carefully but felt no direct aggression from the priest. At his feet lay a large mound covered with thick shroud cloth. It was clearly a body. Siyras sensed two distinct life-forces when he entered, but only one emanated from the room's center. The other was hidden in the shadows of the balcony overhead.

"Why am I here, priest?"

If the cleric was surprised by the direct question, he did not show it. Rather, he simply reached down and drew back the heavy linen cloth covering the body.

"I want to know who this is. It appears to be one of your kind."

The dead man lay face down. Large blood stains were apparent under the body, as were the wounds that caused them. The man's back was covered with deep cuts, some with large pieces of glass still embedded in the flesh. Parts of the extremities were charred, as if the body had caught on fire as well.

The mark of a wrivenent was plain upon the man's back, the dual concentric circles enclosing a series of runes that identified the mage that placed them there. Siyras did not recognize the symbology, however. He knelt beside the body and placed a hand upon the emblem. The touch of the dead man kindled a long-dead memory within him.

Years ago, as he lay dying on a smoldering battlefield, one of the master's minions had plucked his broken body from the muck and mire and delivered it to the bleak confines of his domain. There his injuries were repaired, but his mind was emptied of its contents and relieved of its identity. By some sinister magic, the knowledge and experiences that he possessed, the languages and intellect, his physical skills and talent, were all preserved, but they were filtered and combined with strains of the darker arts to be infused back into his body in a new form. The basis of his identity was replaced by the directives of the master. Siyras was no longer a pawn in a long-forgotten war; rather, he was transformed into an instrument of specific and deadly violence. The hapless soul that was his first victim never saw the dawn of the following day. He instead met the kiss of the assassin's blade while sleeping. Hundreds more followed that fate in the subsequent years.

Siyras felt the smoldering burn of his own mark, even after all these years. As he felt along the dead man's spine, he could not locate the hidden markers that should accompany the mark, tiny talismans that were always implanted in the small of the back.

"I do not recognize this one. His story is unknown to me. But I can tell you that he is no wrivenent. The mark is a deception."

The priest's eyebrows arched upward. "That's quite interesting. So, a common thief with

delusions of grandeur?"

"As you say, this one is common. The city harbors hundreds of them."

"Certainly. But he does appear to have picked up some uncommon talents. He was found in the personal chambers of one of our young scribes—a girl who is very important to the Arch-Rike. Her name is Missy Grove. She is now missing. We desire greatly to see her returned."

"Then it sounds like you need the services of a Finder—a good one. Perhaps the one that's hiding in your balcony is available."

The priest revealed a slight smile. "You'll have to forgive my precautions. One does not usually live past their first meeting with a wrivenent, even one whose mage has reasons to favor the Arch-Rike."

Siyras nodded, slipping his blade back into its sheath.

"Come on down here, Kinmon, and join the conversation." The priest appeared to relax a bit, although his eyes never left those of the wrivenent.

Kinmon descended the small staircase along the rear wall, his lean frame coming into full view before stopping several paces behind the cleric. He appeared like most Fyündular that Siyras had seen, dressed in brown leathers with high boots. His weapons were not openly displayed, but Siyras knew that his daggers were likely no farther than his boots.

"Now, then, is there anything else you can tell us about the deceased? Anything at all?" the priest continued.

"I'm no detective, priest, but this one took quite a beating before he died. I find it hard to believe a young girl did this."

Both Kinmon and the priest shot each other knowing looks.

"My guess is that she was abducted, perhaps by multiple parties, and this one lost the battle for possession," Siyras continued. "But that's a shot in the dark. There is a faint reflection of magic that emanates from the corpse. This one may have been acting on compulsion. If so, I may be able to find the one who was controlling him."

It was Kinmon who responded first. "At what cost, if I may ask?"

The priest did not alter his gaze.

"My methods are my own, Finder, and I act solely at the direction of the mage who created me. I obviously don't have the same regard for life as you might. I don't interrogate people. I am an assassin."

"What I can do is sift through a victim's brain before I dispatch them. That is often an illuminating exercise. If you'd like, I can pass along whatever information I might discover in the process."

The priest nodded, his face paling noticeably as he came to grips with the fact that he may have just condoned the killing of innocents to solve the mystery of Missy Grove's whereabouts.

* * *

As it was on most nights, the shadows obscured most of Siyras' movements, but he was also aided by a range of simple illusions and assorted talismans. Most of those who dwell in the darker locales of the city would rather not be seen themselves, let alone disturb his business, so he normally moved at will. Those who had erred in that regard, even some who had mistakenly decided that the contents of his purse might be of interest, never had the chance to make that mistake twice. The wrivenent had collected several *carnotha* over the years in those "conversations."

Siyras reflected briefly on his encounter at the temple. Even in a city such as Kenatos, where the priests are never far removed from any activity, a selective awareness tended to exist of life below a certain strata. The city was a living entity, with an outward appearance and countenance defined by the Arch-Rike and enforced the soldiers, but also a darker element of its soul, like all creatures, that was chaotic and often sinister. The priests may have liked to imagine that the darker underbelly existed only in the ramshackle streets of Havenrook or that evil only sprang from the barbarian north. Siyras hoped such beliefs allowed them to sleep at night.

The wrivenent crept through the darkness, following an Alkiran man who may have arranged the surveillance of Missy. As he rounded the corner, Siyras drew his long blade and moved in for the kill...

The Muertiati

By Matthew Dunn

Date: 87 AF, The close of the Barbarian Wars.
Place: The Davtian Highway, a few days north of Wayland

The Jester's Moon blazed in the sky, illuminating the night in a dim light. The Finder approached the clearing with caution. He had no fear of Barbarians, they hadn't reached this far south since the height of the withering war, but his prey was a dangerous man with dangerous knowledge. His quarry had abandoned the camp hours ago, but wizards were sometimes known to leave traps behind. He had been tracking Crumpensall southwest out of Stonehollow for several days. The Finder had gained as they skirted the ominous Cottonwood Forest and then finally caught up to him in the rolling Small Lake Mountains before the wizard turned south toward Wayland on the broad Kenatos-Wayland running Davtian Highway. At first, the wizard had been exceedingly cautious, making cold camps far removed from the commonly traveled roads, but as he neared Wayland he had been growing careless. Granted, the Finder had barely needed to flex his tracking muscles to follow Crumpensall's trail from the start, since it took no skill to track a laden wagon. Now he merely needed to ensure that he kept enough distance behind to not be discovered.

He hadn't desired this job at first; however, once his employers explained what was at stake, the Finder took to the trail in earnest. All that remained was to develop a plan for stopping him and keeping his secrets hidden. Some bonds bound tighter than any allegiances, and necessity overruled desire. Should the wizard reveal what he learned, a new war would not surprise the Finder.

This fresh campsite was set in a clearing barely offset from the highway and well lit by the Jester above. The embers from his fire were dead, but not yet fully cooled by the crisp autumn air. The Finder buried the fire, more from ingrained woodsmanship than any desire for stealth. Multiple empty wine casks littered the site, much like the wizard's previous several camps. The Finder examined one, and as with all the previous casks, took note of the peculiar scent. A plan

began to form in the Fyündular's mind. It was time to seek outside assistance. It was time to hire the Muertiati Ali'i.

* * *

The Lady Yasmine's held the dubious honor of being the most prosperous, and the most notorious, brothel and gaming house in The Bottoms (as Wayland City's poor southern quarter was known), if not all of the kingdom of Wayland. Yasmine, the Madame of the house, was an almond skinned goddess with tight chocolate curls and a velvet tongue. Her provocative curves were restrained beneath modest dress, mirroring the glorious excitement of her games and girls nestled within an outwardly unremarkable two-story building. It was a place the uninitiated came to gain experience and lose inhibitions. Many left having lost much more; others never left at all. But Lasko came for neither the company nor the games; he came for the window.

In The Bottoms, people on the street very studiously took no notice of one another, but had anyone paid such notice, they would have assumed Lasko was just another merchant slumming in search of an evening of chance spent in the company of any woman but his wife. The assassin depended on his friendly demeanor and unremarkable face for the anonymity requisite to his profession. A favorite Muertiati tale involved an assassin taking out his hit in the midst of a crowd, only to scream, "Murderer!" while accusing the nearest sinister visage and then fade away into the faceless crowd. No, the Muertiati weren't made up of the scarred and scowling villains of the minstrels' tales, but the amiable neighbors and uncles no-one gave a second look. Tonight, this innocuous assassin was about to take a job.

Feared by all, awed by some, and reviled by most, the Muertiati took no sides in politics, honored no government's jurisdiction, and considered no contracted mark off-limits. This secret brotherhood of men living a life of anonymous peril existed almost outside the everyday world of Kenatos with their own governing body, a rich history, several antagonistic factions, and realm-wide organization. Having been brought up in the streets and gutters of Wayland, the traditional seat of Muertiati power, his childhood was steeped in glorious stories of the mysterious assassins, and there was no finer life in Lasko's watchful eyes—nothing he would rather be doing more.

The existence of the Muertiati Ali'i, Boeotian for the Order of the Bringers of Death, was irrefutable, even to the governments of the realm, and the means of hiring them remained an open secret to all. In every town, village, hovel, or fortress, it was a simple matter to find a man who knew someone who knew someone who could put you in contact with an assassin. Yasmine was simply one such agent, a Point, in Wayland. Points were the only people outside the Order who could identify the assassins by sight, so their numbers were few. She served as Point for almost half of Wayland's Muertiati, but contacts came in to her from a long, branching chain of informers, each unknown to the others. Should the governments of Kenatos ever seriously attempt to act on their desire to eliminate the Order, they would be hard pressed to make any inroads into the convoluted and stealthy organization.

Standing outside, Lasko cast his gaze to the second floor. From the street, the furthest left window on the upper floor of The Lady Yasmine's bore only lace curtains; that was how she put out the word. If there were cords dangling between the panes and curtains of the lit room, then there was a job to be had. This job was two half cords and a full cord with two knots – urgent, dangerous, and high-paying. The best kind. Lasko must have been the first of the Muertiati to see the window, two-knot jobs were rare and got taken quickly. Eager to take on his 45th mark,

Lasko made his way across the street to the bustling club.

Once inside, Yasmine herself greeted him, as she did almost everyone who came through her door, with a hug fit for long lost family. The message in her greeting was clear, "This place is home. You are welcome here, so be at ease." The unspoken addendum was that that made it easier for them to cheat you blind. With a warm smile, and a warmer sway of her hips, she would drape an arm around her guest and start in with the innocuous questions. For a certain type of customer, however, his type, an extra question was always added, "Tell me, how is Lily doing these days? We do miss her so." The question was part of a sequence, a code. The proper response, the one that confirmed you were there for business, not pleasure, and the only answer Lasko had ever given her, was "Just as spry as the day I whisked her away from you."

Like so many times before, with that exchange completed, Yasmine called to one of her ladies in a voice dripping with anticipation, "Vinca, take over the door. I have personal business to attend to." Then she'd slink upstairs to her office, the room with only lace curtains, with Lasko in tow. Once behind the closed door, her sultry demeanor disappeared and she was all business. As a Point, Yasmine was a go-between. He'd never once asked her who her contacts were, who fed her the jobs, and likewise, she'd never asked him about jobs he took. He knew there were at least three other people between her and any given buyer, and she knew enough not to ask him. First she gave him the time and place—The Golden Parrot at midnight—where he would meet his contractor and get the details of the mark; she knew nothing more. Then, as she had done every time Lasko had been there, she kissed his forehead, said a prayer to Seitherell, and removed the cords from the window. A Muertiati had taken the job.

* * *

After accepting the contract, the young assassin had gone straight to the contact point and settled in to wait. The Golden Parrot was a favorite spot for setting up contracts. The quietest tavern in The Bottoms, The Golden Parrot was a place where few men asked questions, and even fewer let their faces be seen. In short, it was a favorite spot for shady figures and shadowy deals. Lasko took his usual seat by the bar. When the hooded man entered at midnight, ordered the Parrot's Beak, and took a table in the corner, the assassin joined him.

Lasko pulled a chair back from the peanut-strewn table and sat with his back to the room; everyone there knew better than to try anything in the Parrot. He recognized the man as his contact by the drink order—no one ever spoke of what they heard in the tavern; this Parrot had no Beak. The man sat across from him, his cloak pulled tight and face set deep within his hood; one wayward curl of bright red hair had escaped the shadows of the hood and stretched toward the light of the tavern. The assassin was accustomed to never seeing his employers' faces; there were plenty of other ways to identify a man. This one's hands were dirt-stained and calloused, his boots worn thin, and he stank of woodsmoke and treesap. Lasko saw instantly that he was a man unaccustomed to city dwelling, a man of the forests. The faintest yellow lights shone from within the hood; Lasko wasn't sure he would have noticed them if he hadn't known to look. His newest employer was a Finder.

"What business do the Fyündular have with the Muertiati Ali'i?" Lasko asked, a smirk on his face. If he caught the man off-guard, it didn't show. The Finder remained still, one hand on his drink; the other, strangely, he kept on the table, fingers curled as if holding a ball, palm facing Lasko. Other than watching for sudden movement, the assassin paid the hand no more mind.

"So, it comes to this then. There are those among my comrades who would have no trouble doing this job themselves, but I find it... distasteful. I am a simple man. I live a simple life alone. I track, I hunt, I find. But murder, no, that I will not do. So, when a murder is called for, who better to call upon than a murderer, no?" the man responded.

Lasko's mood soured. The Muertiati disliked being associated with common murderers. Though it was a widely held association among the public, the Muertiati strove to distance themselves from criminals. Among the Muertiati, murderers were considered merely base criminals with no honor. Assassins performed a service and crafted an art; they were no common murderers. Curtly, he said, "State your business."

"Good, I dislike this place, and would prefer to put my back to it presently. There is a wizard. The man knows things that my... employers would prefer remained unknown. They are very interested that he should be prevented from sharing that information with anyone. Very interested. I tracked him here from the west, but I will get no closer. The price is 300 gold, double if he is silenced before the week's end." He took his hand off his drink and reached into his cloak. The curled hand remained unmoving. He withdrew a small canvas pouch and discreetly handed it to Lasko.

The assassin could tell from its weight it held the offered gold. There was no need to open it or fuss about it here; no one spoke of what occurred in the Parrot, but they all observed. "Done. How do I find this wizard?" Lasko asked.

"I have been tracking him well over a week. The man is a drunkard. He should be an easy mark for one of your.... skills. He ran into some heat with the locals in a realm to the west, and now he wears his scars on his face. He's staying at a hostelry in the business district. He remains solitary, but we cannot take the chance that he will speak of what he knows. I expect this will not be a problem for you?"

Lasko only smiled as he pocketed the purse of gold.

With the details, and the money, exchanged, the Finder left to await confirmation of the kill and the Muertiati began to prepare.

* * *

Lasko emerged from the shadow-dense alley like a spell, conjured forth from nothingness. There was no sound to mark his appearance, no trace of from where he came. His feet were clad in the *slipura*, cloth wrappings with a narrow sole of treated cowhide for traction, and silence. His mark would be arriving at the hostelry across the poorly lit street before long, hopefully sauced beyond the ability of self-defense. Not that Lasko couldn't take the mark sober, but with wizards, any advantage was a welcome one.

Crouched in the mouth of the alley, he ran through various attack scenarios, preparing himself for any unexpected defense. He still hadn't repaired his crossbow since that incident with the Rike-Patrol the week before, so this would be a fists-and-knives kill. At his wrists, the three bands he deemed necessary for tonight's job clattered annoyingly and an invisibility ring was tucked away in a pocket, excessive for tonight. The added reflex speed and protection from magework the various bands provided usually outweighed the danger of their accompanying noise. Unfortunately, he hadn't been able to procure a MagicBlokker on such short notice, but he had two Reflexxors and of course the Integrator. They should suffice for this mark, and if they didn't, well, Lasko'd deal with his supplier in the morning.

Some of the Muertiati frowned on the use of the bracelets. Their Order was many things,

dangerous, secretive, and discreet not least among them, but above all else, there was an overarching code of honor binding the Muertiati together. While there may be no honor among thieves, assassins hold honor higher even than stealth. Marks were never taken from behind or in the presence of family members, and once coin was paid for a hit, either the mark was killed or the money was returned. And always, death was dealt as swiftly and painlessly as possible; there is no honor in torture. Among the older members of the Order, the magical bracelets were seen as a means of side-stepping that hard-won honor, a form of cheating. Lasko held no such illusions. His business was dealing out death, not receiving it, and anything that helped him do business was honorable enough for his standards, even if it was crafted by miserable Lydian halflings.

Lasko took in the foot traffic and lit windows on the street, both minimal at this late hour, and decided an open hit outside the hostelry would be safer than attacking a cornered man in a narrow interior hallway. It should be simple to identify his mark, there were few outted wizards holing up outside Little Wizardom, and even fewer with the telltale scars and discoloration of burns covering half their face. As far as Lasko was concerned, if this drunk Crumpensall was sloppy enough to let himself get burned, then he couldn't be that hard a target to take out. He crossed the broad street toward the hostelry and settled on an acceptable ambush point. All that was left was to settle in and wait for the Wizard to stagger by.

Ambush had always been Lasko's favorite tactic. There could be arguments made for the merits of other attacks, like an anonymous stabbing in a crowd, or declaring your contract to a busy restaurant just before consummating the deal, one of the so-called Proclamation hits. Sniper hits by crossbow were especially popular, though those required skill enough to aim quickly. Each method had its proponents and its detractors, but for Lasko's money, nothing beat the ambush. It took a special kind of man to devote his life to killing for hire, but it took another kind entirely to wait around in one spot for the chance to kill. A man needed certain traits. Patience went without saying, but the right kind of concentration was also vital. If you remained too alert, it could tip someone off, but you had to simultaneously rein in your disinterest, lest you miss your only opportunity at surprise.

Lasko managed the time by daydreaming of a meteoric rise through the ranks of the Muertiati, culminating in his election to the Tri-Blade, the ruling council of each provincial assassin's guild. To be eligible for the Tri-Blade, you needed to have reached Whisper status, 300 confirmed contract kills. There were rarely more than five qualified men in any kingdom at a time. With under fifty kills to his credit, Lasko was still just a WetEar, but Pube (over 50) and Judge (over 100) weren't far off. He dreamed about more than just the Tri-Blade, though. There was always Fletcher's record as well.

Fletcher was the most "famous" of the Muertiati in any kingdom, and tales of his exploits were legend among the Order. He had risen to Judge in under three years, unheard of, and eventually retired with over 400 confirmed contracts, the most of any assassin since the founding of the Order during the Boeotian invasions of Kenatos a hundred years before. Every WetEar dreamed of being the next Fletcher, though most died before even reaching Pube. Lasko himself had taken out two fellow WetEars—revenge contracts from the families of their victims.

As Lasko figured it, the only way to rise as quickly as Fletcher was to take on more hits. Most Muertiati spent weeks trailing their marks, learning their patterns and developing strategies through study. But with that much effort going into each hit, Lasko's rate of 20 kills in a year was considered reckless. He spent much less time on his reconnaissance than other assassins, depending more on his instincts and reflexes to ensure success. This Crumpensall hit

was a perfect example. The Finder had already done the legwork, enabling Lasko to initiate the kill after only two days. He was eager to finish this job in particular; having another wizard-kill never hurt your image among the Order. He'd just have to downplay that this one had been lamed and in his cups.

* * *

It was nearly dawn before Lasko heard anything. A lone man came staggering down the cobbled street, the echoes of his boots announcing his approach long before he came into view. The man veered wildly across the road, lurching from side to side as he neared the hostelry. Lasko affected a drunken slumber as cover, but kept a clandestine eye on the newcomer, waiting for his face to emerge from the shadows of the night. Still a stretch up the road, the man paused to lean against a storefront and vomit onto the cobbles. He then resumed his haphazard journey, one uneasy hand on his belly, the other flailing for balance. Lasko had to wait until the stranger veered mere breaths in front of him before he recognized the tell-tale burn scars on Crumpensall's face. The assassin waited until the drunken wizard lurched off-balance, reaching for the hostelry door, before he struck.

In keeping with his loose interpretation of honorable behavior, he wouldn't deal a killing blow from behind, so he aimed his throwing daggers low toward the gut. As he prepared to attack, the ancient Boeotian rune tattooed on the small of his back began to glow, though it was hidden beneath his tunic. The symbol of a long dead religion drew in the magic of the Integrator bracelet on his wrist, which itself was gathering power from the other bracelets he wore. The magic of the bracelets coursed through him, anticipating his sudden actions, and his arm extended faster than a loosed arrow as the two small blades streaked toward their mark.

They never got that far.

Somehow, in defiance of anything Lasko had ever seen, even with two Reflexxors on his wrist, the wizard had reacted even before the assassin released the daggers. Lasko's blades veered harmlessly to the wizard's side and clattered to the street. Almost before the assassin had withdrawn his magically enhanced hand to grab his next dagger volley, the very aware and completely sober wizard lashed out with a gesture and Lasko was knocked backwards to the ground with the force of a terrible invisible blow. His head ricocheted off a cobblestone, blacking his vision and momentarily disorienting him. That moment was more than the wizard needed. Before Lasko could even shake his head to clear his sight, the empty crate he had been sitting on moments before crashed down on his legs with the weight of a fully loaded wagon. He cried out in agony as they were shattered under the press, but no sound came. Lasko needed to find a way out from under the crate. A wide ooze of blood began seeping out from under it, and he knew he would never walk again. All thoughts of Fletcher's record vanished from his mind, replaced only by pain. This couldn't happen to *him*. He wasn't supposed to die a lowly WetEar, not *him*.

The wizard jumped on top of his torso and grabbed his lapels in a fury. His hair was matted and unkempt, and the burned side looked much shorter and slightly curled. His eyes were wide paranoid disks that, combined with the putrid white scars covering a full half of his face, gave Crumpensall a look of otherworldly terror.

His voice was a forceful whisper, and he spoke with such fervor that spittle flew into the bested young assassin's pained face. "Who hired you? Who sent you here? Where are they? You stupid fool, did you think I couldn't guess they'd come after me? I have been waiting for an attack for weeks! Well, you're too late! I've revealed it all! By Seitherell, their secret's out. No

more power by the flame, no more secret rule for the Firebrand! They'll be hunted down and routed! You stupid, blind fool! I can't believe anyone truly believed those empty wine casks! Everyone knows that spirits block your ability to call forth magic! No wizard would ever let himself drink to that excess! You pathetic, poor fool!" The wizard was half mad, and began laughing in a high-pitched wheeze. "Hee hee whee! Now, who sent you? Tell me! I can make this crate heavier, would you like that? Ha ha hee! Or, if I hear something I like, I might even make it lighter. Hee whee hee! Now, where are the men who hired you?"

For some reason, Lasko's dubious sense of honor chose that moment to flare up, and he vowed to himself that nothing could make him reveal his employer to this insane wizard. But the pain was excruciating. There was no escaping from under that weight, and if he stayed much longer, he knew he'd tell the wizard anything just to ease the pain. As slowly as he could manage with the urgency he was battling, Lasko began reaching his hand toward his remaining throwing daggers.

Before the assassin had the chance to reach a blade, the oddest look came over the wizard's face, as though he heard a faint noise that bothered him. Crumpensall managed to turn his head the barest fraction before his entire body erupted in flames and collapsed onto Lasko, a flailing inferno. The weight on his legs lifted instantly, though he didn't notice. The now limp form of his attacker burned only momentarily, but it still smothered him like a fiery pillow. His face burned and his skin charred, his entire world became one agonizing fire blotting out his breath, and then—cool refreshing air. Someone had removed the dead wizard's body from atop him.

Hands were rummaging through his tunic. Lasko was unable to open his eyes from the pain, but he heard the voice. "Seeing as how you didn't fulfill the contract, I'll be taking back my employer's gold." The Finder. "But still, I thank you. I must admit I found this entire operation distasteful. I dislike Wayland, and am eager to be gone, and I dislike the Muertiati Ali'i even more. But, Crumpensall was far too powerful for me alone, as he was for my employers. These wizards are worthy adversaries. Your assistance in distracting him for me was invaluable. Did I neglect to mention that his drinking was an act? Ah, I suppose I must have. Yes, he left me a trail of empty casks, but the oddest thing, none of them had even the faintest scent of wine in them. Pity, the man was powerful, but apparently not very bright. Now, by Seitherell, tell me, did he tell you anything in those mad ravings of his? It's important, mind you. The fate of the realm, or at least your homeland, may be at stake."

Lasko tried uttering some plea for help, but only a wheeze emerged. Weakened, his head lowered back down to the cobbles. To think, just moments ago, he was vowing to honor this man. The corners of his mouth edged upward in a painful smile as his singed lungs racked him with excruciating coughs.

"Well, so be it. I suppose you did what I needed you to do. Alas, though, I have one more job to complete before I go."

Just before Lasko died in an explosion of flame, he heard the Finder utter odd words in a menacing whisper. *Pyricanthas. Sericanthas. Thas.*

The Order of Fang and Claw

By A.M. Stickel

So you want to be an assassin. Then heed well my message.

An assassin of the Fang and Claw Order is a black cat on a moonless night. His loyalty is above all to himself, and then to the task at hand. The means and methods of his craft are, first and foremost, the weapon of his own body—a certain swift strength of eye and limb—and a mastery of disguise. Besides magical acuity, included are the arts of bow, blade, garrote, and the knowledge of poisons, explosive tinctures, and deadly traps.

Only the orphan who bears a grudge is admitted to the trade, since family ties and a sunny nature hinder the will. He carries a magic talisman and wears a protective brand bestowed by his mentor: a sign passed down from Order predecessors and added to for him. Living apart from society, except for his missions, he is aware that society is served through the use of his art.

At no time is torture permitted a member of the Order. If a member be proved by at least two witnesses to have broken this rule, he will be severed from the Order, and hunted down should he flee. Once caught, he knows that his abuse will visit upon him the pain of a seven-fold death: by fire, by ice, by blood, by stone, by submersion, by flaying and, lastly, by dismemberment.

An Order assassin is never known by his name among the races. He must take to himself a title appropriate to his trade. Among the most famous of these have been the legendary figures of Gray Ghost, Shadow Seeker, Lady Destroyer, Lord Crusher, the Sunderer, Princess Poison, and Pit Pythoness.

Although female members are rarely admitted, with a recommendation from She Who Rules Boeotia, they are permitted to apprentice in the order. Few survive the training, but those who do make the best assassins. These are forbidden to produce offspring, for obvious reasons, although their male counterparts are allowed to do so, provided they do not marry.

Order members are encouraged to charge high fees for their services, so as to amass as much wealth as possible. This helps them live in obscurity, and comfort, too. A tenth of each fee goes to the Master of the Order, who dwells in the Caves of Refuge in Boeotia. He provides for his assassins who survive into old age or who become disabled, and for children fathered—and discreetly acknowledged by—Order members. The Refuge is a sanctuary for assassins of the Order. Rogue assassins are unwelcome there.

I see by your look that you are not put off. Hold out your right hand, palm up. The mark is a thing quickly done. As you may have noticed, I have already been heating my branding iron in the fire. It is now red hot. I will add several grooves near the brand mark to denote your new name. When you awaken from your swoon, you will be known as ‘Slitherer.’ Be sure to bite down hard on the leather in your mouth. Welcome, apprentice.

The Meztrah

By J.G.W

The name Meztrah has become synonymous with terror and mystery. Even the child is put to rest with his or her parent's warning that should they rise before daybreak, the Meztrah will devour them for fun. However, the study of the Meztrah—or Fathers of Death—is rather intriguing.

The Meztrah are named after the first Master Assassin, Meztrah Kazkah. No one knows for sure just how good Meztrah Kazkah was, because it was he who set the standard as a hidden assassin, who would accomplish his jobs by making them appear to be accidents. When it is known that an individual has been assassinated, it makes things very sticky for anyone who would want them dead, especially if someone gained from the person's untimely demise. It is said that Meztrah Kazkah was a master with martial arts, weapons, poisons, and even magic. His favorite tool was a blue medallion that gave him the power to enter a person's mind and project hallucinations of their worst fears, either driving his victims insane or to a point where they committed suicide. Some of the Fathers of Death claim that Meztrah never died and that he will return someday to bring a reign of terror that might even surpass the plague itself.

The Meztrah as they are today have grown into an organization of many sects, and even whole families of assassins. All of the sects and families to at least a degree adhere to the will of the Kazkah Master Assassin or King of Assassins. The Meztrah have to earn the rank of Kazkah by either killing the one currently holding the title or training under him as a prodigy. Training with the Master Assassin is taking one's life into his hands, but to try and kill the Kazkah is downright foolhardy.

Each of the Meztrah have differing skills and talents—some are bold and let all the realms know when they complete a job; others are like Meztrah Kazkah and kill in ways that to even the trained eye seem natural. It is very common for the Meztrah to be skilled in more than one form of death, as well as self-defense. The Meztrah are not exempt from treachery or jealousy, and many Assassin wars have broken out between the sects and houses.

Not all the Meztrah are up for hire. Some kill for the joy of doing so. Others do not charge for their services but only take the most difficult jobs, the thrill being their reward. Almost all of the Meztrah have alternate lives; some are high standing citizens in their respected communities. They are master pretenders able to shape themselves into any lifestyle they please, working in a variety of occupations. This not only allows them to study their victims without notice but also fund themselves in-between jobs. So good are they at being that which they are not, it has given rise to rumors that there are some Meztrah even among the High Brothers.

The only way to tell if one is a true Meztrah is by a blue tattoo that is made of glowing ink that no one can reproduce. They shape a diamond with two intersecting lines, and then place on the symbol the crest of the sect or house that one is a part of. A wolf and a crescent moon for the Wolf Moon sect, a vine with leaf pedals for the mysterious Women's Guild of Assassins, and a swirl to indicate the Kazkah. The initial diamond tattoo is bought in blood, and the accompanying sect or family marks come only when one has proved to be highly skilled, cunning, crafty, and able to survive against the Racksaw—Assassin Hunters.

In some ways it is frightening to consider that such fiends exist, but one must consider

that all of life is one step from the grave. To be the target of a master assassin such as the Meztrah may in some minds be an honor. There still remains much that we do not know of the Meztrah and their ways, for their veil of mystery and shadow covers many things. Much of this I put down in fear that it may bring me the privilege of being a target of the Meztrah, but with the plague hanging over us like a starved jackal, I must record what I've learned lest it be lost forever.

– Brother Lomo of house Beleck

Carrying Souls

By M. Thomas

They didn't look like penitents to Faja. The woman was standoffish and, by the wrinkling of her nose, didn't like the smell of the mules hitched to the wagon. The girl was Faja's age. She smiled a lot, for a penitent. The two arrived at dawn, paying a half-slathe to cross the desert with her father's wagon and its water barrels.

Faja turned her head. From far down the banks of the river, in the direction of the village, she could hear children. They would be searching the drying riverbed for dying fish to take home to their hungry families. She heard Sita's voice, high and carrying and bossy as always, even over the older children. She missed Sita. She put her hand in her pocket to finger the broken leather friendship bracelet thrown at her two days earlier.

"What did she say to you when she came asking for passage?" Faja's mother asked her husband, eyeing the older woman.

"The mother was having an affair. The daughter lied for her, and the husband caught them at it. The mother says if they do their penance, her husband cannot throw them out on the street. She says it is the law of their god, Irah." Marjh spat at the name and then kicked the wheel of the wagon. It held.

Faja turned away from the sounds of the children. They would only run away at the sight of her anyway, or throw mud.

Faja turned away from the sounds of the children. They would only run away at the sight of her anyway, or throw mud. She climbed aboard the wagon as if it was a tree, her arms and legs still too short for the height of the front seat. The wine merchant, Abaz, charming in his rotund way, was entertaining the penitents with the bad juggling of a few tarnished fathes from his pockets.

"Irah's laws are forgiving," her mother said. "Is it the truth, Marjh, do you think?"

"Why would someone lie about that?" Marjh replied. "Perhaps if our god's worshippers held to His laws the way Irah's do, He might not have brought the drought down on us." He did not look at his wife when he said it.

Her mother winced at the words. "Do you think they hide their jewels in the soul pots they carry? I've heard they do that."

"Those two? Not a fathe between them, the beggars," Marjh answered. "Only a half-slathe for the water. Ready, little lizard?"

He climbed up beside Faja, tilting the wagon a little. In the back, the barrels of wine groaned against one another. It was a meager crop because of the small, drought-starved grapes. But it was still good wine, and delivering it would bring in a fathe or two. That was better than sitting around looking at the dust, he claimed.

Her mother came around to where they sat, and handed up a sack.

"That's the last of the flour. I'll have nothing but the dried tack and root mash while you're gone. And there's no salt."

Her father grunted and then looked over at the two penitents. They had taken up the

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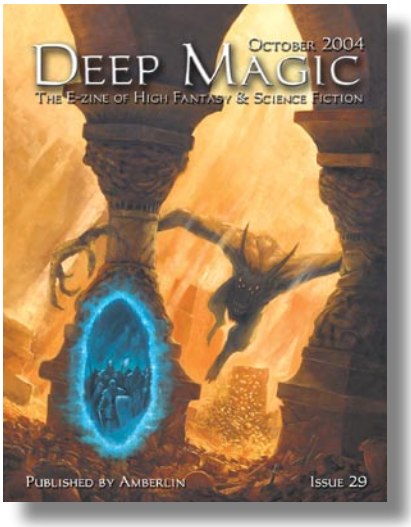
Featured Artist
Rick Sardinha



Age: 49
Residence: Rhode Island, USA
Marital Status: Married
Children: No thank you, I'm full.
Hobbies: Stop motion animation and gardening when I can.
Personal Quote: "Just get on with it."
Favorite Book or Author: When I get time to read, I generally indulge in technical/scientific books, European military history and graphic novels.
Professional and Educational Information: B.S. Biomedical Science, Texas A&M.
Started Painting In: With serious intent around 1986.
Artist Most Inspired By: A really hard question. A core group would be at least Sargeant, Monet, NC Wyeth, Piranesi and Herriman.
Media You Work In: Most frequently oil, digital, and clay.
Educational/Training Background: I am not an academically trained artist but rather learned through independent research, study, museums and experimentation.
Where Your Work Has Been Published or Displayed: Current clients range from Wizards of the Coast, White Wolf Publishing, and Games Workshop Ltd. to the Discovery Channel and Scientific American.
Where Someone Can Buy Your Art or Contact You Professionally: I can be contacted at rick@battleduck.com.
Website URL: http://www.battleduck.com/

Q: How did you come to be an artist?
A: It must have been destiny, as my path followed a long and torturous route. Being an illustrator is my third career and came to me well past when most have made their name and moved on.

Q: How would you describe your work?
A: Representational with a focus on light and lighting effects.

continued on next page

Q: Where do you find your inspiration?
A: Almost anything, at anytime, can be inspirational if you just let your mind run with the experience: a walk in the woods, deep in the pages of a book, a movie or music.

Q: What inspired this piece (this month's cover art)? (Tell us its story...)
A: This painting is actually a commissioned piece for a gaming module cover called Hall of Panes by Troll Lords Games. With this kind of commission, my aim is to illustrate a moment in time where the outcome of a situation is uncertain and thus helps to draw the viewer into the content of the work.

Q: What do you consider your influences?
A: Growing up in Europe, paying attention to what Nature has to offer, and my wife.

Q: What has been your greatest success in your artistic career?
A: I am an actual working illustrator. There is no one time or project that can outshine the wonderfulness of doing what you want to do for a living. The success is in the being and the doing. It is the whole and complete ride.

However, recently receiving a Chesley nomination for my 'Silver Dragon' image was quite a hoot.

Q: What trends are you seeing in the Sci-Fi/Fantasy genre?
A: Over the years, I have seen the SF/ Fantasy genres become increasingly common until they are part of the mainstream conciousness. The paper publishing aspect seem to have fallen away quite a bit, whereas the visual end has increased tremendously. People want immediacy in all aspects of their lives. Computers are now an integral part of art and a tremendous tool in capable hands. The future is going to bring a multi-sensorial type of interactive art involving computers, which would, for example, allow a movie goer to interact within the movie.

Creating Suspense
By Brendon Taylor

If you fancy yourself a writer of fiction, you have most likely written at least one scene you intended to be suspenseful. Whether you aspire to be the next Stephen King, Alfred Hitchcock, Terry Brooks, David Eddings, Isaac Asimov, J.K. Rowling, or any blend of them, your writing will likely need to include scenes that pull readers to the edge of their figurative seats.

Now, if I were so inclined, I could just give you that simple, magic formula that never fails to inject suspense into your writing. But, I'm far too selfish to do that. Also, I don't know any such formula. As a fellow amateur writer and fan of fantasy, science fiction, and horror, I have five thoughts on the subject that, if not overly obvious, may help you think of ways to ratchet up the suspense in your writing.

1. Your readers have to care about at least some of your characters.
2. A quick "gotcha" is not the same as suspense.
3. When it comes to your villains, less is more.
4. When it is time for the big scene, set the stage properly.
5. Make the reward worth the wait.

Allow me to elaborate.

As a fellow amateur writer and fan of fantasy, science fiction, and horror, I have five thoughts on the subject that, if not overly obvious, may help you think of ways to ratchet up the suspense in your writing.

1. Your readers have to care about at least some of your characters.

Learn the lesson that many screenplay writers and directors of 1980's slasher-horror films failed to learn. Violence and mayhem mean very little if the audience does not care about the characters upon whom the violence and mayhem are unleashed. I like to think about this in two ways. First, I want my readers to sympathize and care about my protagonist to the extent that they are concerned about his well-being. Second, I want my readers to dislike my antagonist to the extent that they really want him to fail on all levels. I realize this may be, and hopefully is, a simplified view, but at the heart of the story, under all the layers of character-, world-, and story-building, this essence remains.

J.K. Rowling excels in creating characters that not only do her readers sympathize with, but they become friends with, dress up as, and stand in line for hours to read about.[1] She has the advantage of writing about a very likable orphan and his almost-as-likable friends. But those characters came from her mind before they left her pen. The reason the suspense elements she writes works so well is because readers are invested in her characters. We like Harry, Ron and Hermione, and we really do not want Malfoy, Snape or Voldemort to get the better of them.

Previous articles in Deep Magic have explored the importance of character building. Not

only have we recommended having flawed heroes and heroines, but we have discussed how to write good villains, or at least how to avoid writing bad ones. If you missed them, look those articles over and remember, if a scene is to really deliver suspense, we have to care about the characters in it.

2. A quick "gotcha" is not the same as suspense.

I will freely admit having written a scene where my protagonist walked down a dark, empty roadway, certain that death loomed around the next corner. With his eye on the shadows at the end of the block, my hero nearly soiled himself when a cat jumped from the alley next to him. I do not know why it is that cats jump out of alleys at the worst literary time. I'm not even a "dog" person, so my scene didn't come from any supposed bias. What I wrote was not really suspenseful. I bought into a gotcha trick, and then I deleted it before writing any more of the story.

Don't get me wrong, a good gotcha is not a taboo to be avoided at all costs. It has its place in many fine stories. But it is not a substitute for a deeper, more enthralling element of suspense. Gotchas can work in stories written in a lighter tone, with significant elements of humor, or with orientation to a younger audience. In such instances, serious suspense might be inappropriate.

In more serious stories, an occasional gotcha may work, but I would encourage you to be more original than I was. The difference I see between gotcha and real suspense can be illustrated by comparing the movie *Friday the 13th* (whichever number you care to use) and *Silence of the Lambs*. Please note that neither movie is recommended for young viewers. In *Friday the 13th*, the gruesome murdered uses a machete, spear, pitch fork and other implements that have high squeamish index appeal. The murderer also pops up from behind windows and closed doors, and he lurks in dark rooms waiting for someone to turn on the light. Dead bodies fall on people from closets, trees, and anywhere else the director thought might cause an audience to scream. All of these tactics are designed for shock appeal.

Silence of the Lambs also had several shocking moments, but the film was built more around the suspense of discovering who both Buffalo Bill and Hannibal Lecter really were. Instead of having Hannibal pop out with a gargantuan knife and kill nineteen teenagers that you couldn't care less about, the viewer sees him locked in a very secure cell and learns about his terrifying past through a vulnerable, young FBI agent seeking insight from him to stop another serial killer. Hannibal is highly intelligent, articulate, and even principled. He's also sadistic, heinous, and capable of inhuman aggression. In other words, he's well-developed. The suspense comes as we see a single victim being caught, held, tortured, and prepared for an inevitable death. Time passes, and Agent Starling becomes desperate to save the girl. So desperate that she has to take dangerous risks with Hannibal. In a sense, she has to swim with a shark to catch a barracuda. When she finally comes to the home of the serial killer, the audience does not shriek from a killer popping up or a dead body falling, but it grips the collective arms of its seats, knowing the peril she unknowingly faces. That's suspense.

3. When it comes to your villains, less is more.

I realize I have just given you an example of a great work of suspense where the tension was created by knowing who the villain was and knowing what he was capable of doing. As is often the case in good writing, there is more than one way to milk a goat.[2]

The classic example of this thought on suspense is the movie *Jaws*. When the studio was filming this blockbuster and suffering from budget and time constraints, the giant, mechanical shark did not work properly. The adjustment was for the scenes in which the shark appeared to be limited, and the shark didn't make a full appearance until later in the show. The result was a brilliant work of suspense. Instead of a graphic portrayal of a huge creature grotesquely eating swimmers, viewers saw chilling scenes where a swimmer would realize something was not right. Perhaps they would get bumped, perhaps they would see a dorsal fin. Then, the waters would calm until the moment the shark struck. Also, the movie's score was perfect. If I could figure out how to get music like that to accompany my writing at just the right times...oh, the suspense I could deliver!

The lesson here is that if you have a creature or villain you want to unleash, and it is a major player in your story, perhaps it is better to let it lurk below the surface a little and describe its ripples at first. Terry Brooks does a nice job of this in his writing. In *The Wishsong of Shannara*, the Druid Allanon knows that something will be coming for him. He knows his fate before he reaches it. The ripples of danger grow. As Allanon, Brin and Rone travel through the forest, Allanon knows they are being followed and watched. Terry Brooks lets the reader know that something is coming, and when it finally arrives, the reader just wants to know what the thing is. This scene is a perfect example of my next two points as well.

4. When it is time for the big scene, set the stage properly.

There is a fine line between giving enough sensory detail to bring the reader into the story and boring the reader into skimming to the exciting part. Perhaps the line isn't that fine, but it's never more relevant than when you want to draw the reader to a suspenseful climax. Those ripples in the water mean far less if you've rushed the reader into the deep with a stranger than if you've carefully led them there with a good friend and set the stage properly. The reader needs to know what the place looks and feels like, what sounds and smells set the stage. The more senses you involve, the more lasting the image you portray.

Consider the way Terry Brooks set the Allanon scene in *The Wishsong of Shannara*. Allanon, Brin and Rone have traveled in the wilderness for a while until they come upon a wooded ridge. Brooks described the rugged terrain, using phrases like, "a deep, penetrating roar," "a low and sullen rumble that shook the rutted earth," "freezing spray and a deep, rolling mist," and "tangled branches of the forest trees with their damp, moss-grown bark and earth-colored leaves." Again, this is setting the scene, adding tension as the suspense builds. These phrases tell the reader that the ridge the group is approaching is somewhat foreboding. But even more importantly, it tells them what the place looks, sounds, feels, and even smells like. The group is clearly approaching a powerful waterfall in an ominous forest setting.

Brooks goes on to describe what the group sees as a, "[T]owering column of churning white water poured wildly through a break in the cliff rock and tumbled downwards hundreds of feet through clouds of mist and spray that hung thick across the whole of the western end of the valley." The wooded valley is set before the characters, and they begin to cross it, toward the base of the falls. The mood changes, lightens, and Brooks describes, "[T]he dark pathway that had brought them there to emerge at last from mist and shadow into warm sunlight." They begin to travel, "through deep grass," "the air grew less chill," and "birds flew in sudden bursts of color." Remember the stillness after the ripples.

The characters are about to move out of the darkness and danger of the mountains. They

have seen the signs of safety, comfort and security. "And then abruptly Allanon reined his horse to a stop." The forest goes still. The kind of silence that is described is a shroud. The others become nervous and ask what is happening. Allanon's expression is dark, his face drawn tight and hard. Brooks increases the tension by giving you this detail about the character who might know what is about to happen. The other characters and the reader are clued into the direness of the situation. They move a little further, drawing out the moment, without giving it away. Finally, Allanon stops and dismounts. This signals that the moment has come, which leads me to my last point.

5. Make the reward worth the wait.

The end result of the suspense can be many things—discovering the identity of a secret admirer, saving a helpless girl from a maniacal murderer, a character learning that he is mad and has been the one committing the horrendous crimes around him, or the confrontation between villain/monster and the hero. You do not want to undersell your climax by failing to properly build up to the moment, and you certainly do not want to oversell the climax. This, of course, is the author's judgment call.

Back to the example from the Wishsong, and I won't give away the outcome for anyone who has not yet read the book. The group waits in the glen at the end of the mountain path and looks all around to see what is there. Finally, the creature emerges. Importantly, it is not a bobcat, grizzly bear, tiger, or even a dinosaur. This is a unique fantasy world and the moment requires an original creation. I won't give away what Brooks has created, but it is sufficient to say the description is vivid, the creature is like nothing I had read before, and it lived up to the moment in every way. As it emerged from the trees on the far side of the glen, Brooks took just enough time to deliver its physical description and a bit of insight from the Druid as to its origin. Another important detail from this example is that this climax belongs to Allanon. It is his defining moment of the story, and it happens just past the midway point of the book. These suspenseful climaxes may appear at any point in your story, but the main climax of the book should not be dwarfed by those occurring earlier. Allanon grasps the moment, tells the other characters that this battle is his and his alone, and obtains the others' word that they will stay out of it.

The battle that was foreshadowed for chapters, and served as the culmination of the long journey through the mountains, took but a handful of artfully written pages to complete. It is perhaps the most memorable scene of the book—one that I recalled instantly when thinking of examples for this article, and I have not read the book in more than ten years.

My tendency, because these scenes are so exciting to write, is to rush through them, caught up in the adrenaline of the moment. This is fine, but I must remember to do my work by going back over the scene thoroughly, keeping in mind that this is the scene that should be the most tightly written. It needs to flow smoothly. It may be graceful, powerful, emotional, thoughtful, or any other "ful" words you can think of. It may be a combination of many things. Thus, the scene needs to be free of excess phrasing, clumsiness, inaccurate language, lazy writing, and anything else that cheapens the moment created. Particularly in action scenes, I like to focus on the verbs I have used. I want descriptive verbs, only enough adjectives to color the writing, and I want to include the emotion that a character feels as the scene unfolds. You may have different goals, strategies, and tendencies to keep in mind as you write and rewrite your climactic scenes. You may want to ask workshop reviewers to offer feedback on your timing

and pacing of the climax. Good honest feedback will be invaluable. But, you will also want to trust your gut instinct.

As I ramble this point and article to conclusion, I hope to have given you some valuable thoughts to consider as you put suspense into your fiction. I look forward to reading your submissions to Deep Magic.

(Footnotes)

[1] This sentence was written intentionally to see if the Geek would explode when he realized four separate clauses ended with prepositions.

[2] I know, that's not really a figure of speech, but I already mentioned my gotcha cat and thought better of discussing skinning cats, lest I receive email from cat lovers.

Scent of Evil

By Victoria Randall

When Brother John had awakened in the chill darkness to the ringing of the bells for matins, he did not realize that the wet stickiness on his hands was blood.

It had always been a struggle for him to wake at that hour, but that morning he had felt in his bones a weariness to death, as if he had been running all night. Torn fragments of dark dreams still haunted him when he sat up, swinging his feet to the cold stone floor, perplexed by both his weariness and the wetness on his hands.

He had groped for his stump of candle and coaxed a flame from it on his third try. By its light, to his horror, he had seen the dried blood under his fingernails, and the still wet stains on his palms.

That was why he sat now in the straight-backed chair in my study, facing me, a humble, devoted brother of the church, his eyes haunted by nightmares. He had washed all trace of blood from his hands, and now kept them clenched on his knees as if they had betrayed him, and he wanted no part of them.

I searched for means to reassure him. "It must have been a scratch," I said. "A shallow scalp wound will bleed a great deal." I had only been elected prior of the monastery a few months ago, and Brother John had been my prop and mainstay in settling in and accustoming myself to the role. I was a few years older than he, but he was wise and far-seeing, reliable to the utmost. This change in him was as disturbing to me as to him.

The baker lay in the narrow infirmary cot, moaning and screeching as a brother tried to wash his wounds. A great ponderous lump of a man, his stomach hung like a huge bag on him, oozing yellow fat globules and blood.

"It was no scratch." He raised tormented eyes to me. "There was too much blood. It is not mine, I have no wound anywhere. And there is more. I found-" He paused at a shout from outside, followed by the pounding of running feet. Someone banged at my door, and flung it open without waiting.

Young Brother Giles stood in the doorway, excitable as ever, breathing hard. "Father! Gerard, the baker from the village, has been badly injured. We've brought him to the infirmary. You'd better come and look."

Brother John paled, half rising.

"We'll both go," I said. "What happened to him?"

Brother Giles swallowed. "He ... You'd better ask him yourself, Father."

* * *

The baker lay in the narrow infirmary cot, moaning and screeching as a brother tried to wash his wounds. A great ponderous lump of a man, his stomach hung like a huge bag on him, oozing yellow fat globules and blood. Both abdomen and buttocks had been slashed more than

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Dan Willis
Interview

Age: 36
Residence: Rural Utah
Marital Status: Married
Children: 2
Hobbies: Movies, Nintendo, camping, staying sane despite a hectic schedule.
Favorite Book or Author: David Eddings
First time you tried to get something published: Way back in 1991.
Authors Most Inspired By: Eddings, Terry Brooks, Dave Wolverton, Robert Asprin, Terry Pratchet.
Educational/Training Background: Studied Psychology at BYU.
Schools Attended: Brigham Young University
Published works (fiction/non-fiction/obituaries): "Lake of Death," a short story in the Dragonlance anthology. "The Search for Power." "The Dragon Well," released in September. "Dragon Knight," forthcoming in 2005.
Website URL: None yet.

Q: Tell us the story of how your first book was published. (The Dragon Well is your first published book, right?)
A: I spent several years trying to get into the writing biz. Finally I caught a break in that a friend of mine knew some of the editors over at Wizards. He told me to write a Dragonlance story and send it in, so I did. Of course, they totally hated it. Fortunately for me, they recognized that I could write and offered me a short story in the anthology. I guess that story impressed them because they went from there to offering me a book. The rest, as they say, is history.

Q: What relationship does your book have with the other Dragonlance books in the series? Did you start out to write a Dragonlance book, or did your books just happen to be a good fit with the series?
A: Mine is book three in a four book series, so it's closely tied in. Since it is a DragonLance book, I do have to make sure it fits into their universe. I did not set out to write DragonLance books, but I like writing for Wizards and hope to do more. As for this series, I was approached with a specific concept and asked to pitch a story that would fit within that framework.

Q: How has the internet affected your relationship with readers and/or publishers?
A: E-mail has helped more than the Internet per se. My editor is great, constantly keeping me posted as to what's happening via e-mail. I did run across a review of my short story from someone who absolutely hated it. That was interesting.

Q: Do you have any favorite characters in your books?

A: Absolutely. I think if you're going to take the time to write about someone, you ought to like them. My favorite kinds of characters seem to be the secondary characters who seem to exist solely to keep the main character's feet on the ground.

Q: What influences have helped you become the writer you are?
A: Lots and lots of reading. If you want to be a writer, you've got to read. Secondly, I've been helped greatly by a great writer and a great friend, Tracy Hickman. Tracy helped get me my start and I owe him a lot. Beyond that, my long-suffering wife who has supported me through the labyrinth that is publishing and my father who never failed to encourage and support me.

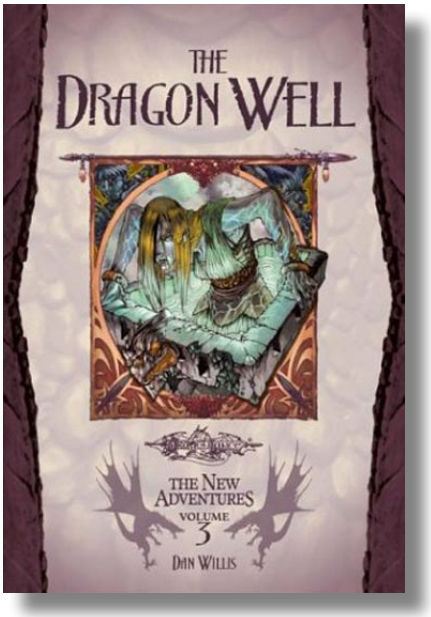
Q: What have you been reading lately?
A: I haven't had much time to read lately, but I have been reading David Farland's (Dave Wolverton's) Rune Lord series. I'm also enjoying L.E. Modesitt¹s Recluse series. I've been working on a young adult novel, so I'm also reading my friend James Dashner's Jimmy Fincher saga.

Q: How much of your time do you devote to writing?
A: When I'm working, I write a chapter a day, five days a week. When I'm preparing a story, it's five to six hours a day. When I'm off, I play. No writing at all.

Q: When you have a time where you don't think you can write another word, what is it that gets you going again?
A: My wife saying, if you¹re not going to write, go out and get a real job.

Q: What other stories are you working on? Can you tell us about any of them?
A: I'm currently working on a mainstream fantasy that I hope to have sold soon. I also have a young adult fantasy I'm working on.

Purchase *The Dragon Well* by Dan Willis



The Consolation of Philosophy

By Gene Spears

What refreshments you have brought me with the depth of your judgments and the sweetness of your songs! I no longer count myself unable to bear the future blows of Fortune. So far from dreading those remedies which you said would sting a little more, I am eager to hear them.
-- Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*

"Logic! Logic! Teach me your immoral logic."
--Aristophanes, *The Clouds*

I should have known something was wrong when the archivist told me to take Socrates to the Hall of History.

"Are you certain?" I said, while the crusty Athenian grumbled behind me. I had envisioned him beneath a wisteria trellis, bantering axioms and antitheses with the most nimble minds in the galaxy. Lively crowds throng the Philosophers' College to gawk at these debates. I'll never forget the day Wogat of Trymon proved to Cirraes of Klumft that his mother was a social construct. When Cirraes retaliated with irrefutable proof that *Wogat* was a social construct, their dispute was settled not with logic, but with Wogat's left hook.

Over the centuries, I have encountered two types of Earthlings—those who kick and scream when abducted by space aliens, and those who inquire immediately into our sexual practices. Socrates's passivity defied both categories.

The archivist's purple eyes stared at me from behind horn-rimmed glasses studded with rhinestones. Silver bells tied to her blue hair jingled a faint warning. "Dock 32-HC-108," she said in a humorless voice, while dangling a requisition slip before my nose. "See, Horatio? Signed in triplicate under the seal of the Sub-Curator for Animate Antiquities."

I opened my mouth to protest, but was preempted by the hiss of a braking tram. The doors flared in a pair of gull's wings. The archivist looked from me to Socrates to the squat vehicle. Her four arms crossed a chest from which architectural granite could be quarried. I stepped into the car and settled in a bucket seat formed from a glossy rubber smelling of benzene. Socrates followed. His grumbling rose in pace and volume.

He'd avoided me on the flight from Earth. I couldn't say I missed the company. The moth-picked wool of his chiton draped a plump figure that hadn't bathed in weeks. I didn't know if the stench would attract or repel Marisca's voracious insect life, and did not care to find out. Beady eyes glared from an unkempt growth of gray. The beard, I had been told, was as cultivated as the man's hygiene.

"If you're some sort of god, then I think you should know I don't believe in you." These words, the first he'd offered since our ascent from the Acropolis of Athens, rolled in a hypnotic

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Artist Profile
Carolina Eade

Titles:

Top Left: Enjambre
Top Right: Tropa de esqueletos
Bottom: Gibberlin

Website:
http://www.carolinaeade.tk/

Jagwog

By Lars Benson & Dave Dickson

Jagwog sucked blood from his massive club. He loved the zing on his tongue, the fire he felt in his veins. The sensation. The jungle people were a rare prize.

He looked around and smiled. He had slaughtered eight by himself. Two, in fact, with one swing.

Jagwog noticed one of the lowly hogclans creeping over to taste the blood too. Before it could lick the weapon, Jagwog kicked the creature in the face. It flew some ten feet before slamming into a tree. The hogclan picked itself up and wheezed for air. The blow should have killed it.

The rage inside Jagwog boiled, giving him a rush he loved almost as much as the taste of blood. No one would challenge his authority, especially within his own ranks. With a roar, the rotting ape leaped forward and brought his heavy war club down on the hogclan's skull. Its head collapsed with a loud crack and its lifeless body crumpled into the shrubbery.

Jagwog spun around to see if any others would challenge him. None of the hogclans glanced his way. Good, they were cowards.

The rage inside Jagwog boiled, giving him a rush he loved almost as much as the taste of blood. No one would challenge his authority, especially within his own ranks.

His appetite would wait no longer. He rushed to the nearest dead jungle person. The blood and flesh from the living, particularly human, were the most desirable food for any undead, especially Jagwog. He tore into the body, ripping it apart in desperate bites.

Though not undead themselves, the hogclans' foul smell and bitter blood kept Jagwog from eating them. Usually. He kept a close eye on his pus-colored footmen as he ate the human bodies. The hogclans were eager and very hungry, but he didn't allow them to eat the people until he had his fill. They tore at the earth and scampered over each other. Fighting. With each crunch, they drooled more until they could stand still no longer. They raced over to their fallen comrade and tore its remains into selfish pieces, quickly consuming the corpse.

Jagwog roared in pleasure; the ache from living an undead existence was less painful now. Less maddening. He would do anything to keep this feeling *alive* in him.

His two dozen minions waited for the signal. Jagwog held them off a few moments longer. Strength, not kindness, kept them in line.

"Feed," he said at last.

The hogclans shrieked with anticipation and rushed over to the remains. They acted as though they had never eaten, some even gulping down entire limbs without chewing. One nearly choked from an arm stuck in its throat. Within minutes, they completely devoured the meat.

The undead ape caught a sound. Lifting the club, he scanned the area. Something was coming.

With a grunt the hogclans froze, instantly knowing what their leader wanted. They

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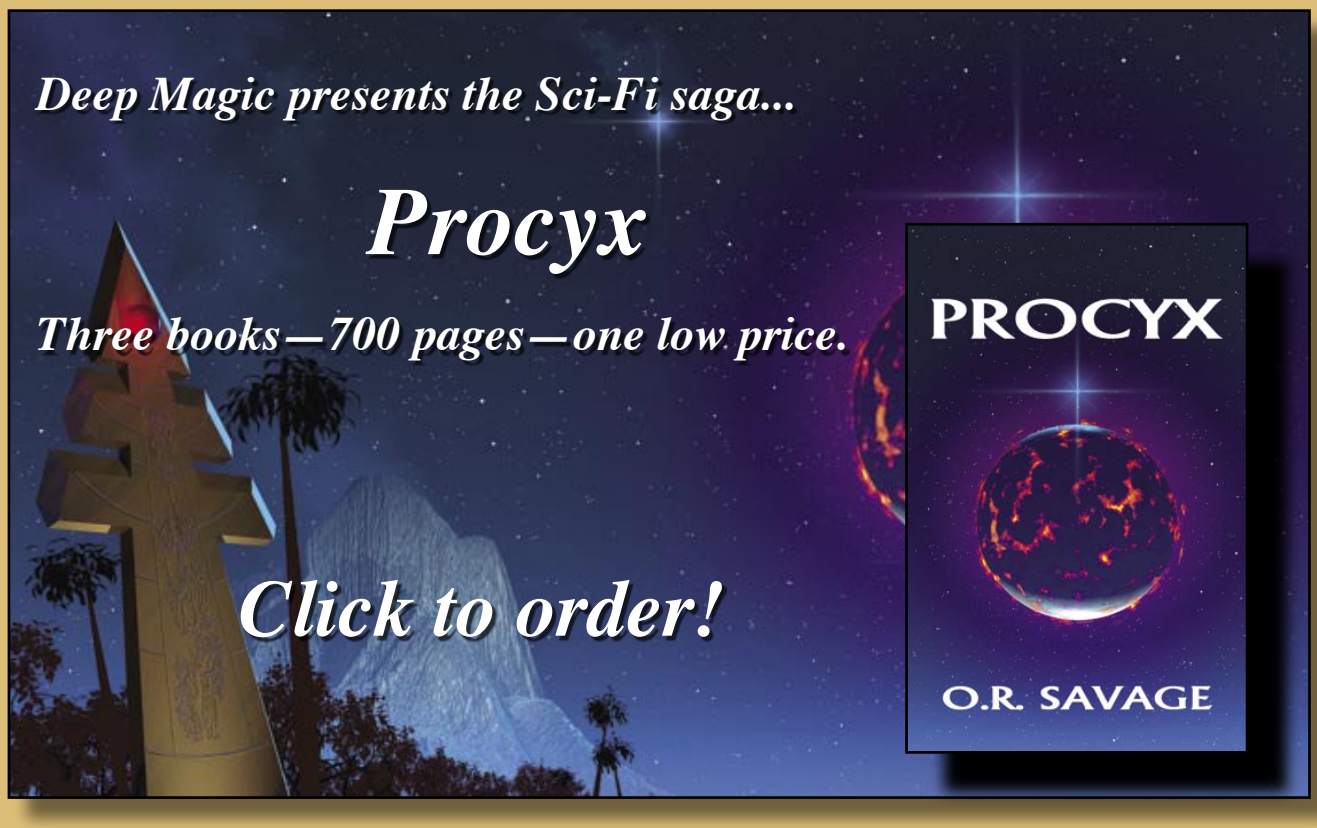

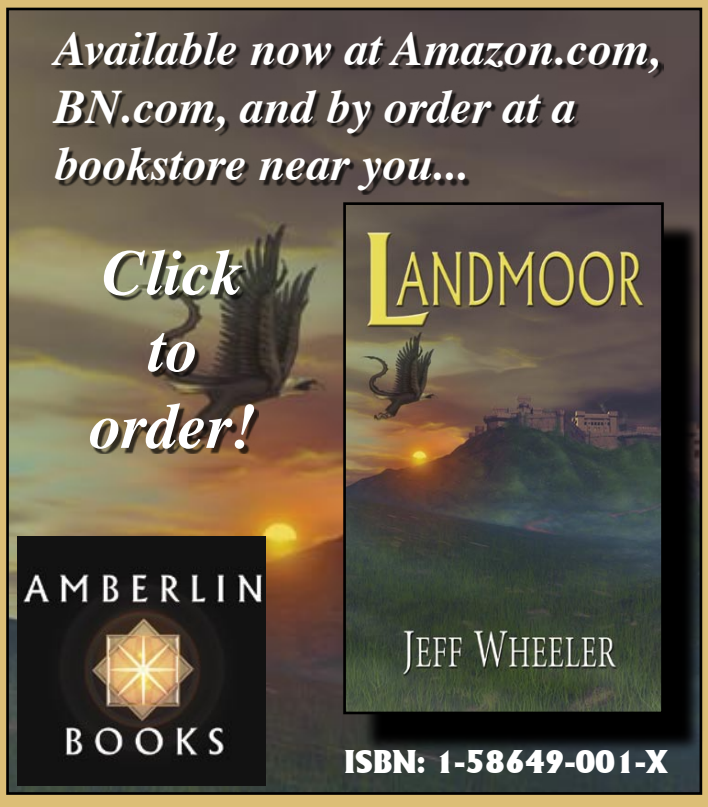

Deeper Magic - A collection of short stories from the first year of Deep Magic.
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Deletion
By Mike Loos

When Harmon suddenly became aware, he couldn't see or hear anything. He couldn't feel anything. His senses were completely useless. In his mind, he was surrounded by an endless void of silent darkness, an emptiness where only his thoughts had substance. Time itself seemed frozen but he knew that he had existed elsewhere before. Waves of memories washed over him. Most were faint, concerning far away events that he barely recognized; others were fantastic dreamscapes that only hinted at reality. He drifted back and forth as the images surged and receded in his mind.

One scene repeated over and over: a vaguely familiar face—a woman—clutching a man he could not identify. She was sobbing uncontrollably as the man she held sat slumped before her. The image was incomplete, however, and faded too quickly for him to discern many details. Other images quickly replaced the scene, but Harmon tried to force them to the back of his mind as he waited for the woman to reappear. As it did each time, the features of her face became clearer. She was looking directly at him, tears streaming down her face. Her eyes pierced his soul as he slowly started to remember...

* * *

Other images quickly replaced the scene, but Harmon tried to force them to the back of his mind as he waited for the woman to reappear. As it did each time, the features of her face became clearer. She was looking directly at him, tears streaming down her face.

Two days ago, Harmon was running yet another diagnostic on the ship's systems, wondering when the soul-crushing boredom might push him over the edge. The mission to Ceres One was barely three months old, but the weeks ahead of him seemed infinite. He glanced at the small chronometer display at the near edge of his visuals but had to look twice when he realized how long he had really been in simulation. It was definitely time for a break. He dialed his neuroptics down to standby, dissolving the simspace environment that surrounded him.

Harmon opened his eyes slowly, allowing the view of the transport cockpit to take shape gradually. The transition back to realspace always unnerved him. He hesitated slightly, anticipating the feeling that he was rushing head first into the nearest bulkhead. Never mind the part of his brain that knew he had been sitting at a dead stop the whole time. The simvisuals were so immersive that many lost track. As his heart rate slowed, Harmon opened an audio channel to his second in command.

"Ndege, are you online?"

"Yes, sir," she replied. "Go ahead."

"Have we heard from the *Corsair* lately? Any updates or chatter of any kind?"

"No, sir. Nothing at all. Is there a problem?"

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Page Turners
Deep Magic Looks at Books

Be sure to check out the Book Reviews website, which contains all current and past book reviews in an easily searchable format. It also allows you to leave your own review or feedback for a book. All you have to do is register on our message boards and you can tell others what you think of the books. We hope you enjoy it, and we'll see you there!

Deep Magic Book Reviews website

Editor's Choice: Fantasy

The Last Light of the Sun
By Guy Gavriel Kay

In this, his latest novel, Guy Gavriel Kay returns once again to his world of the two moons, this time to the north of that world where day-to-day existence is much more violent than in the more refined south of some of his previous novels, such as *A Song for Arbonne* or the Syrantium duology.

The Last Light of the Sun follows the adventures of three young men, each from a different culture. Bern Thorkellson is from the Erlings, wild warriors of the North who live close to their pagan gods. Bern becomes an exile from his home when he steals the horse of the recently deceased governor of the small island he calls home. Bern soon falls in with a group of mercenary warriors, the Jormsvikings.

Alun ab Owyn is a prince of the Cyngael, a people as fierce as the Erlings, but who fight more amongst themselves than against others. One day he and his brother attempt a cattle raid on the manor of the leading Cyngael chieftain. Unfortunately, some Erlings attack at the same time and Alun loses his beloved brother, causing him much grief.

Finally, there are the Anglcyn, the dominant people in the North. Their king, Aeldred, is nearing the end of his life, but he has created a renaissance of peace and learning in his realm. His eldest son, Athelbert, feels inferior to his great father and wants to make a name for himself.

The destinies of these three young men come together when a band of Jormsvikings, including Bern, is duped by the grandson of a former Erling warlord to raid the Anglcyn with the ultimate aim of raiding the Cyngael chieftain who earlier shamed him. The resulting battles bring out the best in the young men as they face who they are and what they were meant to do.

As with the previous novels set in the world of the two moons, the cultures and even the geography of *The Last Light of the Sun* follow those of our world very closely. The Erlings are obviously the Norse, the Cyngael are the British Celts (the Cymrogi), and the Anglcyn are the Angles. Aeldred is modeled after Alfred the Great. And most obvious of all, the Jormsvikings are the Viking raiders of the Dark Ages. As with his previous novels, Kay uses his fictitious world to great effect by making it so similar to our own that the reader does not spend a lot of time trying to figure out the world and instead can focus on the characters and their relationships.

The weak point of Kay's writing shows itself here as well as in any of his books: he does not write action well. When he wants to express quickness of action, he writes a series of sentences that are subjectless. Done sparingly, this would not be a problem. However, in a book like this one, where there are many action scenes, this telescoping style quickly becomes irritating.

But ultimately it is not Kay's action scenes that draws one to his writing. Instead, what one turns to Kay for are the well-developed characters and the growth that those characters experience through the course of a story. And, true to form, Kay delivers those well developed characters which, in the end, make *The Last Light of the Sun* a truly enjoyable book.

Possible objectionable material: There are a couple graphic sex scenes in the book: one right at the beginning, and another later on when Bern first visits Jormsvik. The violence is a bit intense at points, but not shockingly so.

(Reviewed by Matthew Scott Winslow)

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Book Review: Fantasy
The Taking
By Dean Koontz

A book's bestseller status may actually influence certain readers to avoid it. This reader, however, was quite taken by *The Taking*. What first drew me in was the intriguing cover art—not the nice price—on the book's flyleaf. After my local paper published an attention-grabbing review, I decided that this was one of Koontz's works I could neither pass up, nor (after reading it) avoid passing on to others.

The Taking has everything that many speculative fiction lovers look for in a worthwhile read, that rare magical mix of fantasy, science fiction and horror that carries a moral message without preaching. Dean Koontz is an admitted master of his art, yet I'd not read anything of his in quite a while. I'm glad I waited. Beginning his story on the proverbial dark and stormy night, Koontz tackles nature at all levels. In a kind of yuppie version of *Pilgrim's Progress*, he descriptively integrates the response of elements, animals, and humanity in the known world to impingement by the unknown.

For readers who crave writing that addresses, and successfully disputes, certain assumptions by our modern society, *The Taking* provides a banquet. Author Koontz examines commonly accepted notions of the End Times, and comes up with a surprising twist on the roles of those 'taken' and those 'left behind'. Plausible alternate explanations and interpretations of biblical references are given. Yet basic values referring to mankind's stewardship of this world and of its vulnerable and innocent creatures are reinforced. While this is challenge and crisis at its finest, some readers may find its implications disturbing.

The heroine of the story is a writer who must face the possibility not only of the death of her career, but also of her universe. Along with discovering a way to survive, she learns to tap the depths of her will and her spirit. The realistic setting mirrors Koontz's home territory of southern California. Instead of drastic worldwide changes occurring as they did in, say, "The Day After Tomorrow," these happen virtually overnight. Mildly eerie at first, the plot's tension and action escalate at an almost unbearable pace, making the book impossible to put down. The final resolution is not as complex as it could be, yet is fairly satisfying in its simplicity. Koontz is both sensitive and sensible in his depiction of people with cherished religious convictions. He sticks close to the truth of his characters' belief systems in unfolding the fabric of the tale, and thus involving his readers in the truly fantastic design.

I leave it to the reader to enjoy the mental feast that only the rare writer like Dean Koontz can provide. The short chapters make for easy reading, and the rich word fare is served up in sensible doses. The ending could have been more dramatic (and less expositional) after the incredible buildup of the preceding chapters. But, despite this reservation, I decided to gift my copy to a very bright eighteen-year-old for her high school graduation. I consider this tale appropriate for those deep and openminded souls who have seen 13 or more summers on this Earth.

Possible objectionable material: Disturbing visualizations of dark supernatural elements and violent deaths as a result of said elements.

(Reviewed by A. M. Stickel)

Book Review: Fantasy
Abarat
By Clive Barker

Candy Quackenbush lives a most boring life in one of the most boring places imaginable: Chickentown, Minnesota. Hardly anything of interest happens in Chickentown. When her teacher gives her an assignment to find some facts about Chickentown, she is flummoxed and doesn't know where to begin to find something interesting about Chickentown.

One day, however, as she is out walking, she comes

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across a strange creature, John Mischief, a man whose brothers exist as heads upon his antlers. He conjures up a wave that sweeps them away into the land of Abarat, an archipelago of islands, each of which is perpetually a different hour of the day. Soon upon arrival, though, Candy and John Mischief are separated and she is left alone to find her way through that strange land. As she makes friends, she soon discovers that she might have been in Abarat before.

Clive Barker is known more for his dark fantasy and horror novels, although he has written one children's novel prior to Abarat. However, that darker past comes through in this novel. The creatures tend to lean toward the grotesque in their description, especially the more evil creatures.

While the creatures are a bit original, the characterization, unfortunately, isn't. As I was reading this book, I kept on feeling that the whole thing was meant mainly to showcase Barker's imagination. But the plot suffers, the pacing suffers, and the characterization suffers the most. There was little about these characters (or, rather, caricatures) with which I could identify. Instead, as I read I found myself asking what exactly could induce me to read on. It definitely wasn't the character of Candy Quackenbush, nor the wicked antagonist, Christopher Carrion. Matter of fact, the only reason I read through to the end was because I needed to in order to write this review.

As I said above, the creatures are a bit original, but not what I'd call horribly original. That in and of itself is not a bad thing (after all, Narnia features very few creatively original creatures), but combined with the poor writing, it really devastates the book. To make matters worse, the book is filled with Barker's own art, which I found to be very low quality. The book feels more like an excuse to show off his art than the art as a support for the book.

In short, if you're looking for a good book and a fun read, look elsewhere. Abarat isn't it.

Possible objectionable material: nothing much. A little grotesquery, but nothing extreme.

(Reviewed by Matthew Scott Winslow)

Book Review: Fantasy

Wait Till Helen Comes

By Mary Downing Hahn

Molly and her brother, Michael, are having a hard enough time dealing with their new, and quite spoiled, younger step-sister, Heather, when their mother announces that they're moving…to a church. To make matters worse, upon arrival Molly discovers a graveyard on their property, which can be seen from her and Heather's window. Molly's new situation also means that her mother is relying on her to watch over Heather, who would like nothing better than to be rid of Molly and her family. On a visit to the graveyard, Heather discovers a solitary, untended grave, which eerily bears her exact initials, and gives Molly a chilling feeling. While walking, Molly spies Heather talking to herself, and the chilling feeling returns. Despite her fear and dislike, Molly attempts to warn Heather that she is in trouble. Heather however, threatens Molly for all the wrong she feels. "Wait till Helen comes," she says, but to her father and Molly's mother, Heather plays innocent, and neither will believe anything Molly says. With the help of Michael, Molly delves into the town's past to try to discover more about Helen. What she finds solidifies her fears, and only makes her less credible to not only her parents, but her brother as well. Molly must overcome her fears, and her dislike to try and save the one person who hates her the most—Heather, before Helen does come.

Mary Downing Hahn's young adult story is full of suspense, sprinkled with humor and mystery. It's told in first person narration, and the story actually moves along at a smooth and rapid pace from the first line, "You've bought a church?" to the last. The characters are fleshed out well, with each having their own particular quirks. Hahn does a good job of balancing the supernatural with the scientific and skeptical, using Molly to bring out belief in the supernatural and Michael, her brother, to give a more rational, scientific approach and aspect to the story. The characters are forced to deal with sensitive subjects, such as death, and adjustments to new family

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situations, both of which are handled in a good way by the author. The tale is woven well, and while suited for a younger audience, pulls the reader along with nice characterizations. The ending answers any remaining curiosities; however, there does seem to have been room for more aspects, such as tension, and the character of Heather seems to give over a little too easily in some respects. But overall, the end is satisfying. If you enjoy a good ghost story, then *Wait Till Helen Comes* is a short read that will keep you turning the pages.

Possible objectionable material: none.

(Reviewed by J.W. Wrenn)

The Big Man and the Shadow

By Scott Clements

Chicago. October, 1931.

The Big Man was first to arrive. He carried his bat over his right shoulder in an easy grip. To an outsider, he might have been born with that bat in his hand. His dust-worn hat was pulled low over his ample brow to block the dwindling rays of the sun, and his left hand sat nestled in the back pocket of his pinstriped trousers. The Big Man cast his blue gaze over the venerable ball-yard and smiled his infectious smile. The field behind Ike's Lumber Yard was empty that autumn day. A cool October breeze blew in from right-center and scattered tumbleweed and dust across the pockmarked infield. The sun had only just begun to set over the trees in left, and the waning starlight honeyed the battered grass.

Most days, the pitted field would have been overrun by kids: A dozen Ty Cobbs, a score of Josh Gibsons. Among others.

But not today. Today was something special.

Only those select few who loved the game could sense it. The old magic resonated deep within the part of them that cherished the game like nothing else. If asked, not one among them could have said how they knew the day was special, or why. They simply knew. In their souls, they knew.

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Truth, the Big Man thought, drawing a deep, satisfied breath, his barrel-chest expanding as his lungs devoured the October air. It was why he had come.

The Big Man ambled toward the rusted backstop—a ten-foot high, iron-mesh fence, dented and warped by a thousand errant fastballs—lit one of his favourite cigars, and waited. His host would be along shortly. The thought made him smile. With eyes as blue as a cloudless day, the Big Man glanced out into right field. The breeze was stiff and there was no fence, but neither of those things would matter.

It was the sound that would tell the story. The split-second explosion that felt like nothing else in the world, the so-sweet sound that turned every fan's head as quickly as it turned every pitcher's stomach.

No, the wind wouldn't matter. And he sure as hell didn't need no fence.

Especially not today.

It was a good day, the Big Man decided, a special day. Now, all he had to do was wait.

* * *

The Shadow came straight out of center field. He was tall, like a daddy-long-legs was tall, all gangly arms and spindly legs. The brim of his dust-laden hat was torn and twisted, and

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yokes across their shoulders again, lifting their precious pottery cargo out of the dirt. Each small pot, the size of two cupped hands, was suspended from their poles in a carefully woven net of silk. Cheap, tattered silk, but silk nonetheless. The woman carried twelve, six on each side. The girl carried ten. Twenty-two rough clay pots between them, to be delivered to the garden of Irah, in Manaste.

"My father would never have taken on Irah sinners carrying the souls of poor men and criminals." Marjh shook his head.

"The Irah priests will pay you for their safe passage," her mother replied. "They always do. Everything is difficult, Marjh. Everything, for everyone. After this season, when things are better, you'll be able to hire men and have a proper caravan again, and it'll be only priests with the souls of lords who come to you."

"What do I care whether they're priests or penitents? In my father's day, an honest caravan owner need never soil his caravan with the bastards of Irah."

Faja's mother held her tongue. Her father glared at the two penitents a moment longer, fingering a tear in his shirt—a shirt so old it was beyond repair now. Marjh, in one rare moment of levity the night before, swore he would use it to light a cook fire on the return trip home, once he could afford a new one. The prospect of a journey, and the reward at the end, was the only thing that could stir him from his dark thoughts these days.

"Take good care of my investment, Marjh." Abaz, finished with his entertaining, slapped one of the barrels in the back of the wagon. He smiled, his thin moustache rising up under his nose.

"I always do," Marjh muttered under his breath.

He flicked the reins and the mules moved forward, spitting up dust that once was soil. Faja let her body sway with the wagon. After a while, she turned to look back at the two penitents. They marched to the left of the wagon without speaking, although the girl grinned at her.

Faja looked back at her house, set in the last bit of dusty greenery on the edge of the desert. It used to be greener, and the desert not so close to their door. Her mother stood in the doorway, but she had her face turned away from her family's departure. Instead, she watched Abaz draw his own wagon around behind the house, where it could not be easily seen from the road.

"Is your mother waving?" Marjh asked, not turning his eyes from the mules.

"Yes," Faja said. "Smiling, and waving good-bye."

* * *

The penitents had salt, hidden in small pouches among the pockets of their robes. It made dinners more pleasant, though it did nothing to elevate them in Marjh's eyes. For the first few days, the penitents did not speak to them. Marjh told Faja the woman's name was Sha-Kut-Tsa. She had green eyes, and skin the color of sand. The girl was called Myung-Nhut, and her eyes were hazel, her skin the color of wet earth.

"They have strange names," she said to her father the first night before bed.

"Irah names," he said and then spat. "Go out from the wagon fifty steps and pile up some rocks, so we will know the way home."

That night, bedded down under the wagon, Faja whispered the names to herself,

marveling at the strange mantra they made.

Sha-*khut*-samyungnhut. Shakhutsamyung-*nhut*.

Shakhutsamyungnhut.

Sha-Khut-Tsa and Myung-Nhut were attentive to the souls they carried, even if they were only the remains of beggars and thieves. Each night, they took the twenty-two clay pots out of their small nets, uncorked the tops, and stirred the contents with finely lacquered wooden sticks. The sticks had tiny green symbols painted on them. One evening Faja went to stand over their shoulders, peering into the pots. The souls looked like sand.

"We stir them to remind the souls they are on their way to the garden of Irah," Myung-Nhut told her, when she saw Faja looking over her shoulder.

Faja thought of their precious salt, their clean, sturdy robes, their pretty lacquered sticks like jewelry. They bundled their hair up during the day, and shoved the sticks through the buns, baring their necks like prostitutes.

"In my grandfather's day, no honest caravan owner need soil himself with penitents and the souls of criminals," she replied. When Myung-Nhut winced, it made her feel strong.

"Perhaps we should thank Irah then, for the poverty of the devotees of Shalaste," Sha-Khut-Tsa said. "It allows us the opportunity to travel in such gracious company." She looked up at Faja, and the desert wind blew a strand of her brown hair against her expressionless face.

"While you're at it, thank Irah for deceiving the followers of Shalaste, and turning them from the one, true God," Marjh muttered, moving by them to water the mules.

"Irah is as true a god as yours." Myung-Nhut glared at Marjh with her small chin thrust out. "Or, perhaps it is your god who doesn't exist, and Irah is punishing *you* for straying with this drought!"

"Cha!" said her mother. "You talk too much, and you disrespect your elders!"

Myung-Nhut flinched. Then, when Sha-Khut-Tsa turned back to stirring her sand, Myung-Nhut made a face at her back. Faja giggled despite herself.

"Faja!" said Marjh. "Go and pile up some stones, so we will know the way home."

* * *

After a week, Sha-Khut-Tsa took up Myung-Nhut's yoke of soul pots, and ordered the child into the desert to look for food.

"We have food," Marjh said.

"Yes," Sha-Khut-Sa replied. "But very little. How would it be if we penitents did not help our gracious hosts with what little we can offer? Irah showed us how to live in this desert on the flesh of lizards, when our priests sought out the path to the holy garden where our souls would rest."

"I don't relish the taste of lizard," Marjh replied.

"You haven't eaten *my* lizard yet," the woman said.

Faja saw her father smile a little into his beard. It was the same smile he used to have for her mother, when they were not poor, and she would complain about the market not having enough pouli for their Kharmekta holy dinner. He would pull her into his lap until she laughed, and would roar, "Shalaste will provide, you'll see! Tomorrow the pouli will be lined up outside our door, waiting for you."

Faja jumped down off the wagon, and went after Myung-Nhut.

* * *

The girl had caught five lizards already, piling them up at the bottom of a small rise, and Faja saw they were the golden-backed poison-spitters. Even she, in her travels with her father, only managed to catch the brown-scaled, harmless ones. Her father might not like the taste of lizard, but he would eat it when he had to. The older poison-spitters were clever, fat as grouse sometimes, and a delicacy in Manaste. Myung-Nhut's crop was small, but would feed them well.

Faja approached Myung-Nhut's position on the rise carefully, so as not to frighten away her prey. She lay down and crawled most of the way, until she was shoulder-to-shoulder with the girl. When she looked down, she saw Myung-Nhut was watching a sunning spot of poison-spitters. Six of them reclined on flat rocks, surrounding a deadened stump that was once shade.

"Come to say more mean things to me?" Myung-Nhut asked.

Faja didn't look at her. "You're a liar. Your mother is an adulteress. My father says only those who ignore the truth are hurt by it."

Myung-Nhut might have shrugged, or merely re-positioned herself.

"Why did you do it?" Faja asked.

Myung-Nhut readied a small dart-pipe in her hands. "Perhaps *he* was having an affair as well, and I didn't think it would matter. Perhaps he beat her. Perhaps he merely ignored her, and I saw no reason she shouldn't have a little happiness."

She put the dart-pipe to her lips, and blew. One lizard ran a few steps and then collapsed on its belly. It rolled over, showing its pale underside, and the sliver of barbed wood poking out of its neck.

"Perhaps it wasn't true at all, but no one listens to children no matter what they may know," Myung-Nhut said, rising to collect her kill. The poison-spitters scattered.

When she came back, Faja was gnawing one dirty fingernail thoughtfully.

"I can teach you to kill the poison-spitters, if you like," Myung-Nhut said.

"I have my own dart-pipe. I catch lizards all the time."

"I wish I could. I wish I could travel the desert like you. Where I'm from, I don't have any friends my age, and I'm not allowed to go out much," Myung-Nhut replied.

"I can go anywhere I want." Faja peered sideways at the other girl. "But I don't have any friends my age anymore, either."

Myung-Nhut settled down next to her again. They did not speak. Instead, they watched until two of the lizards, already having forgotten about the threat, crept back out from under their rocks. The two hissed as they came nose to nose with one another, flared their fanned necks, and then lay down again, quieted by each other's familiarity.

"There are many children in your village," Myung-Nhut said. "Why don't you have any friends?"

"Those children are stupid, and they tell lies about my family," Faja replied.

The two poison-spitters did not move. Myung-Nhut killed the one on the left, and two more after that, before they decided to catch up with the wagon.

"Can you keep a secret?" the Irah girl asked as they walked, kicking up dust with their sandals.

Faja looked out at the desert. "Keeping secrets is a sin."

"Only the big ones." Myung-Nhut said. "This one is a small secret. Do you want to see it?

Only if you swear not to tell."

With a nod, Faja swore.

* * *

They waited until Sha-Khut-Tsa was busy cooking the lizards, and Marjh was checking the mules. Myung-Nhut put her finger to her lips, and crept to the far side of the wagon where the soul pots lay, still unstirred for the night. Myung-Nhut turned them over, one by one, until she had the one she was looking for. She slipped it out of the netting, then pulled out two more and brought them to Faja. The two girls crouched in the shadows of a wagon-wheel.

"If my mother comes, I'm only showing you how we stir the souls," Myung-Nhut said, motioning to the other pots. She took out her lacquered stick and turned over the pot in her hand.

"They're all marked, see? All of them with the straight line and eye of Irah." She pointed out the line and circle at the top.

"But this one has feet, you see?" She pointed to the horizontal line at the bottom of the vertical. "That's for something else. It's my magic."

She pulled the cork free, and dipped her stick in. Faja saw a gleam inside the pot.

"Gold dust," said Myung-Nhut. "That's what a person's magic becomes, when it's given up to the garden of Irah. Mine, my mother's. That's our penance."

Faja stared at the precious silt. "There's no such thing as magic. Shalaste forbids it."

"There is magic, even if Shalaste forbids it. My mother is a powerful woman. She knows the old ways of Irah. I am powerful too." Myung-Nhut slapped at a fly hovering around her ear. "That's why they're afraid of us, and tell lies about us and throw stones."

She looked away. "My father made us do this penance because he listened to too many lies. But my mother says we must grab hold of good things even in the midst of the bad. Giving up our magic will make them leave us alone, and it will be safe in the garden of Irah. Later, when I am grown, I can go and get it back."

Myung-Nhut put her finger into her soul, and dusted the grains off into the wind.

"Go on," she said. "You can too. I don't mind. What goes out on the wind only comes back to me."

Faja reached out her hand, let it linger over the lip of the pot. Then she drew her hand back and stared at Myung-Nhut, with the dirt of travel on her cheeks and the grime of lizards' blood on her fingers and robe sleeve. "*My* father is a good man," she said.

"My father cares for me, but he cares for his money and position more. If he didn't, he would have ignored the lies and never sent us out in the desert alone."

"We used to be very wealthy. My father had seven wagons in his caravan. My mother had a silk shawl and gold jewelry," Faja said.

"What happened?" Myung-Nhut asked.

No one had ever asked her this. No one had listened to her for a very long time.

"Shalaste is stern," Faja said. "He punishes those who sin against him. The wine-merchant in our village, the one who made us rich carrying his wine to Manaste, he sinned by seeking a bed with someone who was not his wife. And Shalaste brought the drought on us to punish him, and the one who sinned with him. It hurt the entire village."

"Can't they do penance?" Myung-Nhut asked.

Faja shook her head.

"If we do our penance, we are forgiven. Shalaste's laws are unforgiving, aren't they?" Myung-Nhut said.

Faja nodded, left without words. They sat together quietly for a while. Myung-Nhut toyed in the sands of her magic absently.

"Does it hurt?" Faja asked finally. "Does it hurt to have your magic taken away?"

The other girl laughed. "No. There's a lot of praying, and then you go to sleep. It doesn't hurt at all. When it's over, you feel safe. Nothing can touch you, nothing in the world, not with your magic hidden in a soul pot. You won't tell anyone, will you?"

A sudden burst of laughter made Faja peer around the wagon wheel. Her father and Sha-Khut-Tsa were at the campfire. The woman had a piece of lizard-meat flayed on a stick, well roasted in gleaming juices. She was holding it in front of Marjh's nose, tauntingly. It was he who had laughed, pursing his lips closed stubbornly. As Faja watched, Sha-Khut-Tsa put one pale finger under Marjh's chin, where it was swallowed in the thorns of his beard. She tipped his head back.

He closed his eyes and opened his mouth.

Faja turned away. "I won't tell anyone." She went to pile up rocks to remind them of the way home.

* * *

They reached the oasis at the end of the second week. From there Manaste was only another week away. The sparsely green oasis was hidden by hills and boulders. The desert plants were too wise to drink up all the water and flourish, for they knew it would only be a momentary bloom. Instead they lived, slightly withered, for years.

Faja and Myung-Nhut bathed in the pool.

"Look," Myung-Nhut said. "We're the same color." She held her arm out next to Faja's.

"We're not the same," Faja said.

Myung-Nhut laughed, and splashed her.

Later, Faja watched her father and Sha-Khut-Tsa maneuver carefully around one another as they replenished the water-barrels. They did not laugh, nor smile at one another now. But at one point, when Marjh stepped behind the woman to go around to the other side of the wagon, Faja saw him press his hand into the small of her back, briefly, to warn her of where he was. It made all the fun of the afternoon sink low in her belly. Made something else there curl up and growl.

That night she spoke to him while the two Irah penitents were stirring their souls. "After this season, we won't have to caravan with the bastards of Irah anymore, will we?"

He looked up from mending a tear in his bedroll. "Who knows how long this season will go on? The drought has lasted two years. Shalaste has turned his eyes from our village. Perhaps we will win back his favor, perhaps not. Until then, we caravan with anyone who will pay. My father was a prideful man, but even he, I think, would have done this to feed his family." He looked up at the sky, and the handfuls of stars like sand. "There are many things a man will do that he may not like, to keep his family together."

"Next year, perhaps, I will be old enough to drive the caravan myself. Then you can stay home with mother," she said.

He gazed at her for a moment, and then turned back to his mending. "Your mother would

be beside herself, having me underfoot all the time. She likes this time to herself, I think. Besides, you are still very young, and don't know all the ways of things yet. You don't know how to barter in Manaste. You don't know how people may give up one precious thing to have another."

He looked over to where Sha-Khut-Tsa and her daughter were drying their hair by the fire. "You don't need to pile up rocks tonight," he said. "We can remember the way home from here."

Faja got up and walked away. She sat down by the oasis pond, took up a handful of sand, and let it run through her fingers. A night wind caught it up, making a banner of it in the moonlight. She took up two more handfuls, imagining them to be two souls like the ones Myung-Nhut carried. The grains sifted from her fingers no matter how tightly she clenched them. Then, in a sudden fit of anger, she flung them away.

* * *

Faja rose near dawn to the sound of breaking pottery and a scream. She lurched from her bedroll to see her father standing by the wagon, watching, as an armed man went through the soul pots. One of them had been broken under a careless boot heel. He and his two companions wore the ragged garb of desert-thieves, their faces masked with yellow scarves. It was Myung-Nhut who had screamed. She was being held back by the swords of two of the men. Sha-Khut-Tsa had been forced to her knees in front of the leader, who had drawn his sword as well.

"Come now," he said. "We know you Irah bastards hide your jewels in the soul pots to carry to Manaste. Tell me which one it is, and we'll go."

Sha-Khut-Tsa shook her head.

"Do you know?" The man turned to her father. Marjh shook his head.

"No matter," the man said. "We can search them all." He took a pouch from his belt and threw it to Marjh, who caught it out of the air. "For your trouble, though we missed the last marker you left. Good thing we found the oasis."

Faja watched her father catch the pouch in his enormous hand. The hand that caught the money, however familiar, was not the same hand she knew. It was not the hand that had piled up the rocks each night, but it was the hand that smoothed her hair when she came back, telling her she was doing a good thing by marking their way. Faja's throat tasted charred, as if she had swallowed soot.

Marjh looked at Sha-Khut-Tsa. When she spat at him, he said, "What was I supposed to do? I had no choice. If I didn't, they would have robbed me." Then he turned away.

When he did, Sha-Khut-Tsa rose up and flew at her captor. He stuck his sword in her easily, through the robes. She gasped, clutched at him, and then let her hands fall limp. He nudged her body off the tip of his sword with his boot, and she crumpled up in the sand. Her salt pouches fell out of her sleeves, and the stirring sticks slipped to the ground, throwing her hair around on the sand. Myung-Nhut sobbed suddenly, an animal's bray. Marjh turned back, his shoulders stiffened. He looked down at the dying woman, and his hand went to the pouch at his belt. The moment he touched it he pulled away, and rubbed his hand on his pants as if to rid them of some filth.

"Bastard Irah," the leader said. He turned to his men. "Kill the other one as well." Then he began to gather up the yokes and pots.

"No!" Faja stepped forward.

"Faja! Leave it alone," her father said.

She ignored him. "I know which pot you're looking for," she said to the leader. "One of them has gold in it."

"Show me." He dropped the yokes at her feet.

"Don't kill her."

"All right." His eyes crinkled, as if he were grinning under his scarf. He stepped away to give her room.

Slowly, with trembling fingers, Faja turned the pots over one by one. She found the specially marked pot, and pulled it from its net. When she turned back, Myung-Nhut's face was tight with a thousand small details; the set of her lips, her eyes darting back and forth to her mother, the pinching of skin between her brows, the tears on the cusp of her eyelids. When Faja looked at her, Myung-Nhut bowed her head, and put her hands in the sleeves of her robe as if to shrink away.

"It's this one," Faja said, holding it up. Then, as he reached for it, she stepped back, uncorked the top, and turned it over. The gold silt of Myung-Nhut's captured magic fell out in a clump, spread in the air, and was whisked away by a sudden, strong wind that blew up from their feet and tossed sand in their faces. The wind became a dust devil, a glittering funnel that swirled and threw back the sun in a thousand tiny pieces of light. It moved over them one by one – Faja, Marjh, the desert thieves – until it engulfed Myung-Nhut, and died.

When it was gone, Myung-Nhut raised her face. Her dark skin was yellow, painted with the fine powder of her magic. It clung to her eyelids and lips and hair, making her into a glitter-thing whose features were different than Faja remembered. Set in the stone of what had been returned to her, Myung-Nhut became a golden idol, emotionless and terrible.

The man with the sword rubbed his eyes clear with his hand, and then moved toward Faja, furious. Faja saw her father throw out his hand as if to stop him, but he was too far away. Faja looked over at Sha-Khut-Tsa's body, lying in a heap, her blood filtering away into the sand, her hands twitching ever so slightly. Her green eyes were still open, but Faja didn't know what she saw. Perhaps some place where there were no deserts. A few grains of Myung-Nhut's magic floated on the pool of her blood, then sank. Faja looked back to meet the thief's sword.

It never touched her. Myung-Nhut spat between her fingers, as if to make a warding against evil — *tu, tu, tu*. From between her lips came a thick, barbed spike, and it embedded itself in the thief's neck like an enormous thorn. He stumbled back and fell down with his eyes wide, his draining blood making him twitch, making his scarf dark.

The two men guarding Myung-Nhut looked at him in surprise. She spat again — *tu, tu, tu, tu*— and they were full of barbs. Their eyes burst and their necks erupted. They ran around screaming, and then died near the pond.

Myung-Nhut did not speak, and Marjh and Faja did not move. Myung-Nhut went to her mother, and closed her eyes.

"Now I come to see you in the garden," she said. "Irah forgive me for not carrying your body with me." A tear jarred itself loose, too heavy to cling to her eye anymore, and ran down her face. It cleared away the gold, leaving a dark scar of brown skin behind. Then she turned to Marjh. The tear had cleared away all the sadness.

"I had to," he said. Faja watched him twist his hands in his shirt. "I had no choice."

"Do not go to the temple of Irah," Myung-Nhut said. "There will be no money for you

there."

Marjh stepped forward, his hands outspread, a faint, forced smile on his face. "You will need water. I have water barrels. We can still carry you there —"

"Irah will provide for me," Myung-Nhut said. She went to the soul pots and gathered both yokes onto her shoulders, bending herself under their weight. She began to walk away, but then turned. Something of her former self glinted in her eye. The childish challenge to Marjh, the bit of her that killed poison spitters. She brought her hand to her mouth again — *tu, tu, tu*_— and her magic burst holes in the wine barrels in the back of the wagon.

Marjh turned with a curse, tearing his shirt into pieces to shove into the holes, but they just became soggy and fell out. As Faja watched, the tall tree that was once her father became shrunken, silly in a mad way, and sickening. She sank down to her knees in the mud, where the wine mixed with Sha-Khut-Tsa's blood.

"Myung-Nhut!" she cried. "Take me with you. I want to be safe from the world too. Make my magic into gold, and carry my soul pot to the garden of Irah."

Myung-Nhut turned to look at her. "You will have to bring it yourself," she said. "It is too heavy for me to carry." Then she turned, and walked into the desert.

"Faja, help me!" her father cried, still struggling with the wine.

But she ignored him. Instead, she began gathering stones to cover Sha-Khut-Tsa's body. To remind herself of the way she had come.

The End

M-press M. Thomas is a force to be feared and reckoned with. When she is not busy commanding her invisible armies, she can be found in the quietest of corners of the forests, breeding soft furry bunnies that will one day wreak havoc on the civilized world. Her goal of world domination is a ways off yet, but those who know her tenacity know it is a matter of when, not if. In her spare time, she can be found teaching in Austin, Texas. (This bio prepared by The Geek, whose forthcoming expose on M. is the work of months of unseen observation of her in her native habitat. He also hopes he wiped his nose and hand prints off her bedroom window...)

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once.

"Most of the wounds are not that deep," said Brother Ansbert, the infirmarian. "If we can stop the bleeding and there is no infection, he will live."

"That is fortunate," said I. "Gerard, man, what happened to you?"

He peered up at me from pain-dulled eyes. "Who is that? Father Luke? Father, it was horrible. When I went outside to bring in wood for my ovens, it jumped on me out of the darkness. It only growled once, then attacked. When my wife came out with a light it ran off, or I'd be dead."

"But what was it? A bear?"

He stared at me. "A wolf."

"Are you sure? We haven't seen wolves in the village since winter before last. It could have been a wild dog—"

"It was a wolf, Father, I'm sure. I saw its great yellow eyes, glaring at me, and it was huge! Oww!"

I contemplated him, frowning. A grasping, massive bully of a man, he had married his second wife after his first had died of an illness only last spring. There were those who said he had begrudged the money to pay a physician, and so had let her die of a catarrh when a few simples might have saved her. But the villagers thrived on gossip. And I was not his judge. I touched his shoulder. "May God grant you healing," I said. "The brothers will take good care of you."

Brother Ansbert stood at my shoulder. "This is a terrible thing," he said, his deep-set eyes intense. "We should set a guard around the village."

"The villagers will no doubt do that," I said.

Ansbert glanced curiously at Brother John's white face. "What is wrong, brother?" he asked. "Are you ill?"

"No, not ill," Brother John managed to say. "It's the sight of so much blood . . ."

Brother Ansbert gave a curt laugh. "Then you had best not frequent the infirmary." But his eyes followed John as he turned away.

The baker continued moaning as I proceeded with Brother John outside. When I put a hand on his shoulder, he was shivering. "Come," I said. "A cup of something hot will calm -"

"No," he whispered. "Come with me, please. You must see this."

He led the way to his cell, one of the outer ones near the rear entrance to the monastery. There, without a word, he showed me scratches on the wooden door near the latch, and paw prints on the paving outside his door. None going out, but three prints returning. I could see that one of them was tinged with dried blood.

"It was I," he said, hands locked in his armpits, hugging himself and shivering.

I pulled him into his cell and closed the door. "What do you mean? This makes no sense."

He sank down onto his cot. "I've had such dreams, these last three nights, and especially last night. Dark, horrible dreams . . . A restlessness consumes me, I begin pacing, I have to get out . . . I can smell evil. It lures me, fascinates me . . .I have to destroy it, rend and kill it. There is the smell of blood, a terrible lust . . . I cannot bear the dreams. And now this." He buried his head in his hands.

"I see," I said, overwhelmed by the glimmer of a terrible truth. "But how can this be?"

"I don't know. Unless it was that winter we were attacked by wolves. You recall . . .I was bitten."

"That was long ago."

"I have had these dreams for some years. I thought they were a cross to bear, or a temptation to overcome . . . Only lately, they have become worse, darker."

"So you may be right," I said gently. "A cross to bear . . ."

"But I mean the baker no harm!"

"What does evil smell like?" I asked.

He looked inward. "Like something foul, dangerous . . .like something dead that should have been buried long ago."

"The man is a sinner, like us all," I said. "But we are not to judge him. That is for God."

"I know. But in my dreams, I do not care. It is a terrible thirst; I cannot control it."

"We will help you control it." I looked down at him. "It is said, blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness . . ."

"But not those who kill for it."

"No."

"All men have darkness in them, I know that." He looked away into the shadows. "I am not so proud as to think my sin is greater than others. But in me, it can take shape—it can destroy."

"You are not alone in that either," I said. "We will find a way to fight this, John. Do not lose hope."

So it was that we fitted his door with a bolt on the outside, and when a traveling smith passed through, I hired him to repair some hinges, and to forge in secret a shackle at the foot of Brother John's bed. John had told me that his dreams only occurred at the full of the moon, so we had some time. By the next full moon in December, we had all in place.

Then came the celebration of Our Lord's birth, with all the festivities and joy that accompany it. My new duties all but drove John's dreams from my thoughts, though I never ceased to pray for him as for all the brothers in my charge.

The baker healed at last, and was able to go home again, several pounds thinner but no whit less a bully. Brother Ansbert was not sorry to see him go, he told me, for he had nigh eaten them out of their allotment of food.

The moon drew near to full at the end of the month. Brother John came to remind me, and three days before the full, I went after Compline and shot the bolt on his door. We did not use the shackle that first night.

I rose after midnight Vigils, when all were asleep, and made my way across the snowy court to stand for a few minutes in the dark corridor outside his door and listen. At first I heard nothing, as the thick door barred sounds of breathing. I was about to turn away when I heard a swift scrabbling sound, and a clicking on the stone floor. Then I heard something sniffing under the door. "Brother John," I whispered, not wanting to wake the brothers in adjoining cells.

A low growl answered me. I drew back, startled, unable to credit my ears, though I should have been prepared. I wondered what would happen if I drew back the bolt. Should I be the first to die?

I did not want to find out. I stood and listened as the creature in the cell paced, turned and paced, and scratched at the door. The bolt would hold. I went back to my room and passed the night in troubled dreams of my own.

Two days later Brother Ansbert came to me in my study. "I have heard rumors," he said. "Strange sounds are being heard in the night, in the outer corridor."

My heart sank. "Perhaps one of the brothers is having nightmares."

He stared at me, his eyes piercing. "Perhaps he should confess them."

"Dreams are not sins to be confessed."

"It depends, of course, on whether they are welcomed or not. I just thought you should know." With an inclination of his head and barely suppressed contempt in his glance, he left the study.

Brother Ansbert was a man for whom I found it hard to feel brotherly love. I sighed. I am a cautious man, probably not suited for the post of responsibility I have been given. I am easily guided by others, and tend to rely more on their counsel than my own, having doubts of my own wisdom. I find my post a heavy burden; but it is mine and I must bear it as best I can.

Brother John seemed pale and weary during that week, but meek and uncomplaining. When he came to confession… well, he had no great evil to confess, no more than any man. That was a relief. Then came the night of the full moon.

That night the whole corridor was awake, and brothers came to rouse me from my bed. I went down with them to Brother John's cell and stood to listen to the scratching and growling coming from behind the locked door.

"Father, who put the bolt on his door?" asked Ansbert, his eyes shadows of night in the dim light. "Do you know anything of this?"

"It is under control," I said. "You must all go back to bed."

"But it sounds like a wolf has gotten in there!" said Brother James. "Shouldn't we try to kill it?"

I met his eyes. "No. Go back to bed and sleep. It is only a few hours to morning prayers."

"If there is evil in our house," said Brother Ansbert, "we must eradicate it."

"So we shall," I said. "And each of us should begin with his own heart."

I went back to my bed, though I did not sleep again that night.

* * *

So it went, through that month and the next. By the next month the door had sustained such gouges and scratches that we used the shackle. The next morning I dressed Brother John's bleeding ankle myself, torn even though we had used padding. Through it all he was patient and uncomplaining, though he grew thinner each week, it seemed to me. He did extra penance, and spent many nights when the moon was not full kneeling in the chapel.

Then came February, a colder month than we had had in many a year. The deer had died in great numbers, and the wolves from the mountains grew hungry and bold, venturing closer to the village. Early in the month, I happened to be in the still room with Brother John, who was binding up dried herbs, when the miller and his daughter came from the village.

The miller was named Baldwin, a dark-browed, surly fellow who looked suspiciously on us before he spoke. A few paces behind him followed a young woman, silent, hooded against the cold. She was not even a woman yet, I thought as I caught a glimpse of the childlike silhouette of her face.

"We got some herbs from a brother here last fall," said Baldwin. "We need some more—costmary, he named it."

"What is it used for?" asked Brother John.

"For this." He reached out and roughly pulled the hood back from the girl's head. I was standing to her left, and saw only the clear childish outline of her face, lovely and fresh, with a blush rising to her cheek. But I saw the sudden widening of Brother John's eyes, and moving behind him, I saw why. A hideous growth disfigured the right side of her face, a tumor, huge,

pitted and hairy, that made her blind in her right eye and pulled the right corner of her mouth into a distorted grimace.

The child cast down her one good eye and stood in patient silence, enduring our gazes.

"For that," said her father in disgust. "Though little good anything does. But the herb keeps it from growing worse."

"I see," John said, his voice neutral. "I will see what I can find." He went to rummage among the herbs while the man continued his bitter monologue.

"It's a curse the wench has had from shortly after birth. I'll be stuck with the feeding of her all her life, it looks like, for who would have her to wife, as ugly as she is? Unless I could find a blind man who'd take her on." Throughout this the girl stood quiet, biting her lip, betraying nothing. A single tear escaped from her good eye, and she wiped it furtively away.

"We do not know the purposes of God," Brother John said in reply. "The gift of a daughter is a great one, not to be despised. She will keep you from loneliness in your old age."

Baldwin gave a snort of laughter. "Who'd rather not be lonely than have to look at that? And I have to beat her to get a lick of work out of her."

Brother John's hands trembled as he handed the bag to the man. "You should not beat her. Kindness will work better."

"Little do you know, brother. Talk to me when you have brats of your own; then your advice will have some weight." Baldwin grinned and winked, adding, "But maybe you have already; I suppose you have to keep such things under wraps."

I saw the brief flare of John's nostrils, as if he had caught a whiff of an unclean stench. "I have no children. But if I did, I would cherish them as my own flesh."

"Easy for you to say, brother. Will you take grain in payment for the herbs?"

"There is no charge," said John. Baldwin nodded his thanks and strode off down the path. The girl, with a final humble glance at us and a whispered, "Thank you," hurried to follow him.

When they were out of sight, I saw that John's fist was clenched on the table, his eyes shadowed by pain. He murmured as if to himself, "So much cruelty . . .There is a terrible hunger in me, a hollowness that aches to be filled. I do not know how to live with it."

I put a hand on his shoulder, and felt the tension in him. "We can pray for her . . . And for him," I said. "That is all we can do."

He turned away, his shoulders sagging. "Yes," he murmured.

* * *

When the full moon came the next month, I lay sick abed. A fever had come unlooked for and taken me over with sweating, trembling of the limbs and pain in the joints. I had no more notion of the passing of the days and nights than a newborn babe and forgot to see to the bolting of Brother John's door.

I learned later that he had asked young Brother Giles to see to it. He had even locked the shackle himself, but he had grown so thin in the last months that the shackle was of little use. And Brother Giles, being overcome by curiosity on the third night, had unbolted the door to see what manner of creature whined and scratched within. He found out when it rushed past him, knocking him into the wall where he struck his head and fell unconscious for some time.

The first I knew of it was when I came to myself, shivering and lying in a pool of sweat, gazing out of the window. Slowly, what I was staring at swam into focus, and I realized that it was the apparition of the full moon. At that moment, a long drawn out howl from a great

distance away rent the silence of the night.

Seized by dread, I struggled to rise. Brother Ansbert, who had been watching in the room, came at once to my side. "Father," he said, "you must not get up. You have been very ill."

I seized my robe and began to pull it on. "Thank you for your concern," I muttered. "I'm feeling much better."

He took my arm. "Really, Father, you mustn't get up."

I met his eyes. "Get out of my way."

Startled, he let me go, and somehow I found myself at the outer gate. Several of the brothers had come with me. They tried to persuade me to return, but I was overwhelmed with a premonition of terror and was not to be dissuaded, so they came with me.

As we drew near to the village, which lay less than a mile from the monastery, we heard shouts and saw lights. I felt a terrible sinking of my heart, but pressed on. The snow lay deep and crisp on either side of the path worn by feet, and we went single file. We reached the first houses, and a woman came crying to us. "Brothers, help!" she cried. "Something terrible has happened."

She pointed to a house set off by itself near the millpond, and we went in that direction. There we found a scene of horror: the disfigured girl met us, trembling and crying, clutching at the gown torn from her shoulder. She pointed to the one room of the house, where pressing inside we found the miller himself, throat and chest slashed and bloody. Neighbors were trying to stanch the blood, but as I knelt beside him I saw that it was too late. Though he still lived, the pallor of death was in his face.

He grimaced in gleeful hatred through his pain. I leaned near to hear his words: "At least I got the fiend back," he wheezed. "He ran limping off, but you should find him nearby—nail his hide to my door!"

Those were his final words. He gave a rattle in his throat and died. I left him with Brother James, and rose to stumble out the door.

I did not know what I was searching for, but it was not long before I found it: roses of blood in the snow, dark in the moonlight. The prints of paws ran with them, and the blood lay in great gouts by the time I saw the body, lying under a pine. He had tried to reach the forest.

The paw prints changed to human footprints just before the body. I knelt at Brother John's side, but the breath was gone already. The stab wounds had been deep, and the miller's vengeance had already overtaken my friend. I reached out a trembling hand and closed his eyes. The men with me crossed themselves and uttered prayerful ejaculations, but I could only kneel in the snow and weep, overwhelmed with grief and futility.

* * *

The funeral morning was cold and clear, with a wintry sun shining in a pale blue sky. Some few of the brothers meant to accompany me for the final words, although we could not lay Brother John's body in consecrated ground. Brother Ansbert had come as well, as if to keep watch and assure himself that I comported myself correctly. Grief had eaten its way into my soul, and I felt a bone-deep numbness.

When we came out of the monastery gates, several of the brothers bearing Brother John's coffin, to our surprise a crowd of the villagers were waiting for us. I had not realized the depth of their respect for Brother John until I saw them assembled there.

The girl with the disfigured face, whose name I had learned was May, now came up to me.

She had a bunch of dried flowers in her hands, and her hood drawn over the right side of her face; she wept with her left eye. "I am so sorry," she said in her child's voice.

"I am sorry as well, that he frightened you so," I said. "He would never have wanted to do so, in his right mind."

She gazed at me. "It was not Brother John that tore my dress," she said at last. "It was my father. The wolf stopped him from hurting me. He will never hurt me any more!" A fierce wonder infused her words, as if the realization were still new to her.

She hesitated, then said, "May I?" and gestured with the flowers. I nodded dumbly.

She went to the simple coffin that the brothers bore, and laid the bunch of flowers on it. As she did so, she reached out a hand to steady herself against the coffin. Then she gave a little scream, and put her hand to her face.

I ran over to her, and saw that the tumor had gone: melted back into her face. She looked up at me wide-eyed from a lovely, fresh girl's face, with no trace of disfigurement. She ran her hands over her cheeks, and began sobbing. The village seamstress ran over to her, stared into her face, and cried, "A miracle! It's a miracle!"

Noise and confusion reigned briefly, until I raised a hand and called for silence. "We will go to the churchyard," I said when all could hear me. "He will be buried in consecrated ground."

Brother Ansbert pushed his way through the villagers, protesting. "Father! He did great evil—we cannot do this."

I raised a palm. "I cannot read the mind of God," I said. "I can only see the signs he sends me, and this is clearly a sign. Brother John was a man who hungered after righteousness, and struggled with a grave affliction. You can discuss it with Our Lord when you arrive in heaven. Here, you will do as I bid you."

We returned to the churchyard, and Brother John was laid to rest with the other brothers.

I am a child in these things, and no scholar. But blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled. I believe that my friend has now come to the source of all righteousness, and of mercy as well.

The End

Victoria Randall, an RN, is the fantasy columnist for Alienskinmag and the author of The Ring of the Dark Elves. Her website is www.talesoffantasy.com. Victoria notes that this story is one that has haunted her for some time, since she joined the Catholic church a few years ago. She suspects that the struggle of Brother John is the same struggle that each of us faces, to some degree, against the evil in ourselves and others.

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lilt. "If you would like, I could even prove that you don't exist." A smug expression dared me to rise to this bait.

I admired the scenery whipping past my window. A ridge of volcanoes kept a smoky watch over the northern pass of the Humanities Peninsula, a string of verdant jungle and white beaches dotted with some of the Museum's most popular collections and Marisca's most tony resorts. Holographic billboards winked with subliminal fury. I sank into the rubber embrace of my seat, which translated the tram's hum into pleasurable stimuli.

"How low we have fallen," Socrates said over a sigh, "when I cannot even find a good dispute in my dreams."

"So you think this is a dream?"

"What else could it be?"

My bark of laughter rouged his cheeks. Over the centuries, I have encountered two types of Earthlings—those who kick and scream when abducted by space aliens, and those who inquire immediately into our sexual practices. Socrates's passivity defied both categories. If he thought he was dreaming, then he'd need to wake before the first eager visitors pressed their noses, or other respiratory apparatus, against the force field of his display.

"Have you ever eaten in a dream?" I asked, recalling the gluttony with which he'd downed an entire sacher torte the night of his abduction.

"Not that I remember."

"Have you ever passed wind?" I continued, thinking of the embarrassing incident in the Customs Queue of Marisca Terminus.

"Can't say that I have."

"Then by the process of deduction..."

"Induction!" he snapped. "Specifics to generalities, not generalities to specifics." His eyes lit on a jet-sized saurian snatching a dolphin from the Bay of Social Insect Aesthetic. "Where am I and why have you brought me here?"

I suppressed the urge to gloat. "You are on Marisca, a world whose distance from your Athens cannot even be described in your language. You have been chosen for exhibition in our Museum, the most prestigious collection in the known universe." I paused for dramatic effect. "Some call it the Galaxy's Attic."

"Am I to be displayed?" Beads of spittle punctuated his disgust. "Like a sculpture of Phidias?" His voice's pitch rose with agitation. "Will I be posed with a discus, a javelin, or something else . . . a sheep, perhaps?"

"It's nothing like that." I extended my hands, palms upward. "We won't treat you like a statue." *Unless you misbehave, then we'll pack you in a crate and cart you to the basements.* I chose not to mention that.

Socrates grunted, unimpressed with my assurances.

"We want you to continue your studies," I said. "We've assembled an impressive collection of philosophers. Here, you'll be able to dispute with the finest minds of a hundred worlds!"

Socrates leaned forward in his bucket seat. "These philosophers of yours, do they profess wisdom and enlightenment?"

I nodded.

"Then I will disabuse the lot of them of those notions." Socrates closed his eyes, and for the first time since his abduction, lapsed into a motionless sleep. I soon followed.

* * *

We woke to the jerk of locking brakes. The tram hissed and whined to a stop before a stone obelisk set with a mad profusion of hieroglyphs. Socrates watched and mumbled as I placed my palm over an inscribed serpent and hula-hoop. The ground rumbled, and a door whisked open. The void of five-space beckoned. Socrates shuddered, but he followed.

A war chariot awaited us, plated with bronze. A pair of white geldings pawed the linoleum. Ostrich plumes sprouted and swished from the tops of their heads. A nice touch, I thought, even if those responsible had mixed Earth's Greece with Egypt. I stepped onto a groaning sideboard, and Socrates followed.

"Dock 32-HC-108," I said. The horses snorted, and we were off.

For a pan-dimensional being like myself, travel in a Xnychtgnax Loop is no great shakes. But to a three-dimensional bloke like Socrates, the sight of entire cities rolled into yarn and spun into mittens must have been disturbing. Yet the old man said nothing. He just clenched the chariot's side rail with a grip that could bend steel girders. I ignored the philosopher, dreaming of a generous collection bonus and a year passed in a beachside cabana, sipping flaming rum drinks served by willing Lalani veil dancers.

The chariot rattled to a stop in a cavernous hall. Arched vaults soared over mighty columns. Gold dazzled us from all directions. We stepped onto stunning mosaics of lecherous fauns and centaurs groping nymphs of unnatural proportions. Gilt icons stalked the walls. A Virgin Annunciate lay prostrate before a fiery Archangel Gabriel, her primitive era's substitute for home pregnancy testing. A Virgin Dolorous swooned before a crucifix, stained with blood that leached in a stream of rubies from a crown of ebony thorns.

"This can't possibly be right," I said.

"What's wrong with it?" A hint of avarice gleamed in Socrates's eye. "Any place with this much gold can't be all that bad."

"Socrates!" chimed a woman's voice from the far end of the hall. A purple figure leapt from a throne set beneath an ivory baldachin. She shuffled toward us as quickly as her elaborate skirts would allow. "At long last. I've been waiting for years!"

I turned to Socrates and asked my question with an upraised eyebrow. He responded with a shrug of his shoulders.

Slippers swished with the approach of this vision of purple and gold. Her silk gown clung to a figure for which a tent would be more suited. Gold bracelets, thick as irons, rattled while the spray of diamonds about her neck focused the lamplight like paraphasic lasers. A silver halo danced in an erratic projection above a cascade of black ringlets. Her face, a painter's palate of lipstick, rouge, and eye shadow, arrived moments before the rest of her.

"I'm sure you're eager to continue your Ecclesiastic History," she said. "Just as I'm eager to read it. But after all these years, you must spare a few minutes for a tour of the place. Isn't it just magnificent!"

"Such grandeur is lost on those who dwell in the palaces of the mind." Socrates passed an appraising eye over the woman's abundant décolletage. "Perhaps you would care to explore them with me?"

The woman laughed briefly before her jaw snapped. She sniffed twice. A grimace marred her face. "Really, Socrates, must you imitate the filthy habits of your pagan namesake? As for that ridiculous beard . . ."

Pagan namesake. Her chatter faded with my agitation. The gilt, the throne, her hooked nose, her long neck, her reference to an "Ecclesiastic History." The bezants I carry for petty cash

were starting to ignite in my pocket. I pulled out the first coin my fingers stumbled on, dreading what I would find. Fate, or the curious coincidences that abound in five-space, produced a gold disk stamped with the image of the very woman I confronted—Saint Aelia Pulcheria Augusta, Empress of the Romans.

"There's been a terrible mistake," I said.

Pulcheria raised an eyebrow.

"This isn't Socrates Scholasticus."

She favored me with a look that could freeze helium.

"This is Socrates of Athens." I looked abashed at my argyles. "I've abducted the wrong Socrates."

* * *

The Curator would demand a full report. I rushed to investigate the facts. After two weeks of rooting about the labyrinthine administrative offices for the Hall of History, I found the file beneath a half-eaten pizza.

Pulcheria had inked her petition in a flowing script. In crisp, imperial tones, she'd demanded that the Museum abduct one Socrates Scholasticus so that he might complete his history of her reign. Between frequent invocations of the Almighty, a wilted affidavit revealed the circumstances of the historian's disappearance—a boating "incident" similar to those I once rigged in the waters between Florida and Bermuda. The Collection Board's red seal appeared in the "approved" box of the Abduction Impact Statement. A pink slip dangled at the end, the file copy of the Board's directive that I abduct "Socrates." Apparently thinking this would produce a 5th century A.D. historian not a 5th century B.C. philosopher, the Board had offered no further instruction.

I steamed along with the fresh pot of tea offered by a nervous admin. The historian, I could collect at any time. The philosopher was driving me to distraction. I raised my cup and sought comfort in the scent of rose petals. I had abducted Socrates hours before he was to drink the hemlock that would end his life. His important work lay behind him. How could his death possibly weigh in the balance of history?

I finished my tea, and then returned the file to its place beneath the pizza. Earth called. The Curator would demand answers.

Without Socrates' three-dimensional encumbrance, I could hop a Channel to any space/time in the planet's history. But where to go, and when? Greece was a mess when Socrates died, and things were fast getting worse. But that's not the *only* reason I opened my first Channel to Julio/Claudian Rome. I like a party as much as any sentient in the galaxy.

* * *

Whatever his faults, Nero knew how to throw an orgy. While his uncle, Caligula, had favored the baser carnal appetites, Nero set a table that could make the gods swear off ambrosia and nectar. Dormice fried to a honey brown tempted the eye, while platters of lamprey dressed with asparagus and truffles teased the nostrils. Spiced lark's tongues steamed beneath fresh lotus blossoms, hidden treasures to titillate the refined palate and kindle the fires of Venus. Whole roast swans and peacocks, resplendent in their refit plumage, were poised to spring from their platters and honk at besotted guests.

The constellations progressed above me, painted in stunning frescoes on a dome rotated through some hidden contrivance. Lithe servants of both sexes offered wine and immodest proposals. The latter I declined; the former I accepted with some reservation. Roman wine could overwhelm the palate with its sweetness. Surprise greeted my first swig of Nero's offering, the perfect complement for the gamy peacock. I smacked my lips and reached for a dormouse.

A toodling of horns and tweedling of flutes silenced the revelry. Nero descended marble steps with the poise of the bronze images that surrounded us. Gold dust sparkled from his hair and beard. Red ochre streaked his lips and cheeks. Diamonds glittered from a clasp fastened to a cape of purple silk. To his left, a woman of stately beauty surveyed the orgy and yawned. To his right, a youth of unnatural pallor stroked the imperial arm with a lapdog's affection. Poppaea and Sporus. Nero had arrived armed for whatever passion the larks' song might summon.

The servants scrambled to present the Emperor a jeweled goblet topped with wine. "My dearest friends and guests," said Nero, lofting it. "You honor me with your company."

"Praise and long life to Nero Caesar!" said a young man whose drooping eyelids spoke of dissipation and depravity. "He who could teach Bacchus the Art of Revel."

"Let us not praise *Nero*," the Emperor said. "Since this feast is the gift of Jupiter Optimus Maximus."

"How, now," shouted a slurred voice from the end of the table. "Do the gods themselves now man your kitchens?"

The Emperor drained the goblet and tossed it aside. "Jupiter aids more in the cooked than in the cooking. 'Twas his temple image that furnished the coin that purchased these dainties."

A throaty growl rumbled beside me. A sour man dressed in a simple tunic glared at the Emperor. The beard and the wisps of hoarfrost fringing his temples looked familiar. But what was Lucius Anneas Seneca, the pillar of Roman Stoicism, doing at an orgy? The man was supposed to be in self-imposed exile, penning consolatory tracts of philosophy to ease the grief of his pending suicide.

"Jupiter melted down for coin!" Madness danced in Nero's eyes. "My lyre! Quickly, someone fetch my lyre! The Muses assail me. Oh, happy company, to be the first to taste the sweet fruits of my inspiration, of my Immolation of Jupiter. I shall sing a lament of Ganymede that will drive the very walls to tears!" Nero's mouth seized Sporus's. Their kiss ended only when a breathless servant presented the Emperor with the requested instrument.

"Disgusting," muttered the man beside me. "It's enough to make you want to kill yourself."

"Then why don't you?" I said. "If virtue must be scorned, vice rewarded, and the Gods dishonored, then what is the purpose of living?" I paused to assess my words' effect. The man's brown eyes were fixed on my own. "But perhaps I have read too much Seneca."

The man forced an uneasy smile. "You have the advantage of me . . ."

"Horatio."

Nero strummed a melancholy chord. His back arched. His throat cleared with a rattle of phlegm.

Oh, you frivolous Muse,
who dance and flirt on fair Parnass,
whilst fire taunts Olympic slopes,
wasting all to dust and ash.

Seneca grimaced. He speared a dormouse on the tip of his knife. "Philosophy can bring consolation to the living. But when death approaches, the philosopher is as weak as any mortal vessel. Whoever heard of taking one's own life for an idea, of dying solely for the sake of virtue? The very notion is preposterous."

I stared into the bottom of my cup. Cold tendrils were working their way into my stomach. "Cato did," I said. "To avoid the indignity of Caesar's mercy, he took his own life after the Battle of Thapsus."

Seneca looked at me as if I were foaming at the mouth. "I don't know where you learned your history, friend. Cato died in his bed forty years after Thapsus."

The wine soured in my stomach. Something was very, very, wrong.

* * *

It didn't take me long to find out what, just one hop back and six hops forward. The actual investigation consumed only a few hours of my week on Earth. The rest of it I spent partying. That wine-guzzling gropefest the Borgias hosted in the Papal Palace even made me forget the horror of my discovery—but only for a night.

The Curator would be furious.

I contemplated the purchase of a funeral plot, but in the end I desisted. If certain rumors about my boss were true, there'd be little of me left to bury.

* * *

Eratosthenes, I will call him, since his true name requires a triple-hinged epiglottis and several hours to pronounce. For centuries he's sat in the Tower, eyestalks quivering over stingy budgets, incomplete inventories, unworkable schedules, uninformative program notes, and the miles of rolling hill that wrap the Museum in a nurturing, green embrace.

I found him freshly groomed and grumbling in a basso drone that rattled dozens of priceless porcelains perched precariously on dusty bookshelves. Fragrant oils slicked the checkerboard print of his scaly hide. Pinstriped silk draped his egg-shaped shoulders. A cylindrical hat sat in the nest of his ten eyestalks.

"Tea?" he asked, pointing a claw to a pot of blue porcelain set beneath the same layer of dust that covered the rest of his office.

I nodded a polite gesture of refusal. "Why the cape and fez?"

"Press release." The Curator spat the words as if they were a curse. He swept a pile of mold-dressed papers from his desk. "You must have noticed the protesters."

I picked my way through the bones and other knickknacks scattered on the fruitwood floor. Behind the clutter, a picture window served a panorama of architectural bad taste. My gaze dropped a hundred floors to a congress of ants writhing before the candy-stripe canopy that shaded the Tower's promenade. I rubbed a bruise on the back of my shoulder.

"I did not stop to read the placards," I said.

The Curator's eyestalks swished, as if buffeted by a sympathetic breeze. "It was wise of you not to loiter. The Rights Advocacy Watchdog Museum Ethics Advisory Tribunal has grown militant."

"What is RAWMEAT demanding this time?"

"Nothing significant." The Curator's claws slashed the air in a casual arc. "Just a right of asylum for Exhibits."

Several of my sphincters tensed.

"I don't understand why they'd request this." The Curator ignored the look of indigestion contorting my face. "In theory, you might find a case of mistaken abduction having a material effect on the natural timeline, where the prospect faces persecution in his own space/time."

Rolls of scaled flesh jiggled as a cavern gaped in the Curator's midsection. Green droplets sizzled on teeth that could rend an automobile. "It would take a complete idiot to pull that off. I'll probably die before it happens!"

Were I not shuffling in the loafers of this hypothetical "idiot," I might have found the Curator's comment amusing. His species' longevity required the adoption of galactic rotation cycles for their baseline "year." Eratosthenes was right. Stars could coalesce and nova in the time that mere coincidence could spawn such a scenario. I suspected that in my case, coincidence was being given a boost by a blue-veined hand wrapped in a soiled chiton.

The Curator set his fez at a dashing angle and dealt his cape an extravagant twirl. "So I acceded to their demand."

I feared that my sphincters might lurch in a permanent state of contraction. "The press release?"

"Airs within the hour." His eyestalks jutted to their full length, then snapped in a ten-fold dart straight at my face. "Along with another piece that calls for a kudo or three."

"Socrates?" I said in a weak voice.

"A brilliant bit of collection, that one!" I had never seen such enthusiasm in the Curator. I wondered at its physiological side effects. "Time to clear your mantel for a second Trebukan Prize."

I suppressed a groan. My first Prize, awarded for the abduction of one Elvis Aaron Presley, would resent a competitor. I envisioned the vermiform statuary at war for control of my mantel, and my gaze dropped to my argyles.

"He won the Philosophy Medal!" Eratosthenes said. His eyestalks tangled and untangled in a blur of motion. "Got that pustule, Wogat, to admit he doesn't exist!" The eyestalks froze. "What's wrong, Horatio? You're looking a little peaked."

"Socrates must return to Earth."

The eyestalks wilted. The gash in the midst of his torso opened wider, revealing further lengths of teeth. I thought again of the bones, and of persons seen entering the Curator's office and never seen again.

"The abduction was a mistake; the entire timeline of Earth has been set askew." I reached into my satchel and produced a first printing of Galileo Galilei's Confessio Peccatorum, dedicated to his "dear friends at the Holy Office of the Inquisition."

Ten minutes later, and an angry field of red had replaced the checkerboard on the Curator's hide. "Let me see if I can get this straight," he said in a foreboding whisper. "Because you prevented this Socrates from drinking the hemlock that his city-state decreed him, some *tradition* of resistance, even *suicidal* resistance in the cause of ideology failed to instill itself in the Earth ethic. And as a result, those people never moved beyond a cosmology that places their sorry planet at the center of the universe?"

I nodded, impressed for the thousandth time by the Curator's cognitive flexibility.

"Which means we won't be seeing those first Earth spaceships next century." The Curator looked from my forearm to the bones that littered the floor of his office.

"If you think your planet's in the center of the universe, there's not much incentive to develop manned space flight."

A monstrous hum rumbled from beneath the Curator's scaly bulk. "Which means we won't be seeing those tour groups from Germany, Japan, and Florida that the Board of Governors were counting on to balance the books in the *next* century."

He snatched a dagger from his desk and began to pick his teeth. I decided to seize the initiative before the teeth were clean and the letter opener put to other use.

"This problem is my creation; and only I can solve it."

A single eyestalk traced an elliptical arc.

"I know more of Earth and its customs than any other sentient in the galaxy."

All ten eyestalks joined in the motion. "Then you have a plan for convincing this Socrates to return voluntarily for his execution?"

I swallowed sour bile, searching for the vaguest hint of a plan. "Socrates claims he's a philosopher. Perhaps I should try some philosophy."

"Perhaps you should." The Curator closed the cavern of his buccal orifice with a tight snap. "I don't think I have to remind you of the consequences of failure."

* * *

Socrates was an Iron Age barbarian with a paper trail. None of it written by him, of course. The spiteful old poseur prided himself on never having come up with anything worthy of a written record. The task of defending his primitive sophistries he left to a fawning band of wastrels, who followed him slavishly and hung on his every word. The most prominent of these was an Athenian named Plato.

Earth's Hollywood, which serves as a planetary weathervane of cultural merit, has never made a motile graphic representation (in either two or three dimensions) of a Platonic dialogue. I never appreciated why until I undertook the research for my confrontation with the perfidious Socrates. The genre is singularly unappealing, from the standpoint of character development and plot. Yet in Plato's Crito and Phaedo, I found a wealth of material that could not fail to convince the old villain to return to Athens. All of it in the words of Socrates himself. My logic had to succeed. The problem was as good as solved. Or so I thought.

I found Socrates on a vine-shrouded loggia, ensconced in a throng of groupies with wide eyes and other ocular organs trained upon him. He'd spiffed up for his audience. Mad tangles of gray had fallen to a barber's blades. A neat beard spiraled in orderly rows. Purple brocade worked into a snowy chiton furled with the passionate gestures punctuating his speech.

"Having established philosophy as the most worthy of all pursuits, we must talk now of the honors and emolument due those who excel in her service." The sweep of his gaze fell upon me. A malicious grin appeared above his whiskers.

"I see that our college has gained a new colleague, striving for the flame of wisdom to cast aside the dark pall of his ignorance." His eyes sparkled with menace.

I responded to this bait with a bland smile.

After a few seconds fixed in this ridiculous pose, Socrates dropped his arms and turned to his audience. "Let us make him feel welcome. Class, this is Horatio. Hello, Horatio."

"Hello, Horatio," echoed thirty voices in a clash of pitch and timber.

Socrates stroked the antennae of a Phralian mantis with the fondness of a master for his favorite pet. "How may I serve you, Horatio?"

"You can return to Athens and drink your hemlock."

The mantis hissed while Socrates struck an abject pose, arms outstretched to his "class." "*Tssk*, Horatio, you would have me deny these poor sentients the gem of my wisdom solely to correct your own mistakes? Perhaps we should discuss personal responsibility and the consequences of error."

The class muttered their approval of this project.

"I would rather discuss the purpose of living."

Hoots, rattles, gasps—the surprised exclamations of twenty-six species—echoed on cold stone.

Socrates arched his eyebrow. "Very well then. What is the purpose of living?"

I beat away the smile tugging at my lips. The old poseur had taken the bait. Eagerly, I embarked on the task of reeling him in. "I think we can agree that the important thing is not just to live, but to live well?"

"There is merit to such a view."

"And that to live well means to lead a life of justice and honor?"

"There is wisdom in what you say. I am willing to hear more."

"Let us speak, then, of justice." The text of the Crito rolled in my mind. My voice rose to a majestic pitch. "Would you agree that regardless of popular opinion or consequence, it is in all cases evil and dishonorable to commit an injustice?"

Socrates stroked his chin. "I cannot think of an exception." Shades of doubt tinged his voice.

"Not even when one has been wronged?" I said, pouncing on the logical entrée. "One must never return injustice with injustice, though that is the natural response of the ignorant?"

Socrates looked from the mantis to the swaying flora of a potted Nylak deathlily. "In no circumstance must one do injustice."

"To inflict injury on another, that is surely a form of injustice?"

Socrates nodded. His fingers played in the chiton's purple brocade. A bead of sweat gleamed on his forehead.

"Then to answer injury with injury, to retaliate against injustice done us, is itself an injustice, too?"

"Yes, yes." The philosopher's hands twitched. "Get on with your argument. The class is losing its patience."

Judging from the looks of interest trained on both of us, a giggling troupe of Lalani veil dancers could not have distracted them. But I chose not to mention that.

"Concerning contracts and promises, would you agree that the just man strives to fulfill all that are honorable?"

"One ought to honor his agreements."

"Then why, my dear Socrates, do you choose to inflict injury on the Athenian body politic by flouting the promises and covenants incident to your citizenship?"

Socrates looked agog as the entire class gasped at my impudence and genius.

"Are you not grateful for the laws that have nurtured and succored you since the date of your birth, such as those that required your father to provide you an education? Can a city continue to exist if mere individuals can nullify its legal judgments? Can you deny that what you intend may rend not only the laws, but the entire political fabric, of Athens?"

My adversary's eyes smoldered with hatred. His fingernails dug into his palms. I searched the folds of his chiton for a dagger, or other weapon, and was relieved to find none.

Tension crept on pincered feet through the loggia. All I could hear was the buzz of bees among the roses and my own pulse throbbing in my ear.

His neck arched. Yellowed teeth protruded from the curl of his lip. "Let us talk, Horatio, of honor, justice, and courtesy."

I felt like a moth, helpless beneath the gaze of a deranged lepidopterist. "What's on your mind?" I said in a weak voice.

"Would you agree that the just man strives, whenever possible, to reward with courtesy the hospitality of others?"

"Yes," I said, instantly regretting my response. Those who agreed with an initial premise of Socrates ended their dialogue looking like nincompoops. "No," I added, cracking an idiot's grin. "Well, er, I guess I'm not really sure."

"Well surely you would agree that a guest ought not answer courtesy by violating the children or livestock of his host?"

I couldn't deny that one. So I nodded.

"Even if the guest were a Spartan, and could excuse such practices as common in his country, you would agree that he should refrain from them while lodged in Athens?"

"Uh . . . I guess that's right."

"So while at home, the just man honors the laws of his country; and while abroad, he honors the laws of his host."

I felt giant pins driven through my arms, buckets of cloying formaldehyde emptied over my head. "That would seem to be the way of things."

"Then tell me, Horatio, what law of Marisca condemns me to death in Athens? By what court have I been sentenced, and on the charge of what complainant? Is it not the law of this fair planet to offer asylum and refuge to poor wretches in my sorry state?" Socrates turned to his class, arms stretched in supplication, crocodile tears streaming down his cheeks. "Have I done any here such grievous wrong that they would seek from me the ultimate penalty?"

"No, Socrates," shouted the class in a chorus.

The tears vanished. Socrates fixed me with a look of a triumph. "Can you answer my questions, Horatio?"

"No, Socrates."

So much for the Crito. Game one to the Athenian devil. But it wasn't over. I had to win only one, and the Phaedo offered munitions of greater caliber. I breathed deep before reentering the fray.

"Now let us speak of death, the senses, and the immortal soul."

"I can think of nothing I would rather discuss."

* * *

My dispute with Socrates left me battered and bruised. Like some perverse eel, he wriggled his way out of every snare I set for him. Each of my arguments was twisted and fashioned into fresh nooses to strangle the breath from my logic. The Phaedo he chopped like so much tissue paper. The Crito he treated as a juvenile joke. Once he went on the attack, the humiliation he heaped on me was so shameful that I dare not relate it here. Let's just say that the ordeal ended only when I admitted that I don't exist.

I revived my courage with scotch whiskey, served from a bar outfitted with an impressive mirror. With each swig, I studied my reflection, confirming that what stared at me was not some

spectral illusion, but real flesh. As the whiskey melted the cold doubt of my own existence, it opened fresh pockets of courage and resolve. It was time to wheel out the heavy artillery. It was time to visit BRAINIAC.

The Bio-Robotic Adjustably Interactive Noetically Intelligent Algorithmic Cybot dwells in a series of caverns deep beneath the flint hills that border the Plain of Applied Sciences. BRAINIAC boasts that it is the galaxy's most under-utilized resource, but lacks the self-critical faculties to figure out why. While I disagree with those who call it an "arrogant, bloviating pusbag," I do not enjoy my sessions with BRAINIAC and strive to avoid its company. But desperate men do desperate things.

I slid into a crushed-velvet sensory interface. A nest of serpentine electrodes writhed and probed my body for neuroapertures. The process is not painful, but it does tickle. Neurons fired, and the interface soon prevailed over my senses. I was transported from a dark cavern set miles beneath a planet's surface to . . .

. . . a dark cavern set miles beneath a planet's surface. A single electric bulb dangled, dribbling light into the gloom. Water drops amplified to hammering echoes. The place smelled of mold and decay. As my eyes adjusted to the darkness, a shape emerged from the shadows.

BRAINIAC wore the robes of a Benedictine monk. A knotted sash draped its paunch. Its skin glowed green in the feeble light. Pointed ears jutted from its cranium. The ridges that crossed its scalp rivaled microcircuitry for geometric complexity, and likely performed the same function. Kaleidoscope figures played in eyes the size of hockey pucks.

"I'm not surprised to see you," it said. "Seems that you've dropped a big one in the punchbowl, Horatio."

I was in no mood to debate what had been dropped in the punchbowl and by whom. So I proceeded directly to my query. "I need your help in defeating Socrates."

Violets swirled in the saucer eyes. Delicate fingers emerged from the folds of its cassock. "You should have come earlier. I could have stopped you from making a fool of yourself."

"I'm not here for your insults." Spades of anger dug into my voice.

"Temper, temper." BRAINIAC waggled a finger at me. "Don't get your panties all bunched in a wad."

"My *panties*?"

"Oh dear, I seem to be doing it again. A courtesy program is such a tricky thing, even for me." BRAINIAC paused to assess the effect of its apology. "I suppose you should go ahead and place your query, before the damn thing bollixes again."

I produced my notes, which, along with my clothing, had made the trip to BRAINIAC's digital domain. "I would like to model the subject, Socrates."

"Specify source material for said model."

I strained to make out my writing in the cavern's gloom. "Access Plato of Athens, acquire subjects Apology, Crito, and Phaedo."

"Subjects acquired."

"Access Xenophon of Athens, acquire subjects Apology and Symposium."

"Subjects acquired."

I paused over my list's last entry, an amusing bit of character assassination penned by a contemporary of the old fart. "Access Aristophenes of Athens, acquire subject The Clouds."

"Subject acquired. Model of Socrates complete."

I rubbed my hands together. My pulse began to throb. "Now we compile a reference file. Begin with Plato of Athens, subjects Gorgias and Symposium, and with Aristotle of Stagira,

subject *Nicomachean Ethics*."

"Subjects acquired."

My voice quaked as I summoned works of sublime philosophy that would crush Socrates like the cockroach he was. "Add to the reference file David Hume, subject *Inquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, John Stuart Mill, subject *Utilitarianism*, Immanuel Kant, subject *Foundation for the Metaphysics of Morals*, Friedrich Nietzsche, subject *Beyond Good and Evil*, Cirraes of Klumft, subject *Multivariable Moral Calculus*, and Wogat of Trymon, subject *I'm Moral, You're Not*."

"Subjects acquired."

I felt my blood rush in waves of exhilaration. "And now, my good BRAINIAC, using the most subtle and powerful philosophy available, construct an argument that will convince that maggot Socrates to return to Athens and drink his hemlock."

The light exploded in a blast of blinding colors. Sparkles of amethyst and ochre rained on BRAINIAC, reflecting the jumble of hues at war in its eyes. Its back stiffened, like a cod tossed in liquid nitrogen. Wisps of smoke tickled its robes, followed by tongues of flame, followed by the stench of searing flesh. Pale legs vanished beneath the cassock, which flared, like a black tulip crushed beneath a brick. Its anguished face descended a line marked by a glowing stalagmite.

"Help me," said BRAINIAC in a pathetic whine. "I'm melting."

"Disable program!" I shouted. But it was too late. BRAINIAC bubbled in a black pool at my feet. I looked about the cavern, wondering if I would ever escape, and if I did, whether the cost of rebuilding BRAINIAC would swallow my next billion paychecks.

"Is there any consolation in this fool philosophy?" My cry echoed against limestone pillars.

Slurps, like the rude smacking of oversized lips, erupted in front of me. "Consolation. Philosophy." BRAINIAC's voice whispered from all directions. "Boethius, Anicius Manlius Severinus." The voice began to take shape, as the black puddle coalesced into a square mass. "Roman statesman and philosopher, consul in the twenty-first year of the reign of Theodoric the Great. Most noted work, *The Consolation of Philosophy*."

Where BRAINIAC once stood, a leather tome gathered dampness and dust. I bent to pick it up. "What's it about?"

"The nature of Providence in a world where the wicked prosper and the good are persecuted."

Not quite what I was after. In fact, the whole thing sounded completely off topic. But since I was feeling a bit persecuted myself, (the words resonated in my head: *I don't think I have to remind you of the consequences of failure)* I was interested in seeing what old Boethius had to say. Most of all, I wondered what this Boethius would do with a boss who punishes failure with ingestion.

* * *

I curled before a roaring fire with Boethius and a Bahama Mama. Crackles of flame bathed my recliner's leather in layers of soothing warmth. Gregorian chant rose in sonorous strains above the hiss of my Trebukan Prize and the drub of a winter storm against a glass wall overlooking the beaches and basalt spires of the Nalipupuktali Coast. How, you might ask, did I afford such luxury? The answer is none of your business.

My drink had dropped below an umbrella and orchid garnish before I figured out the point of the work. Boethius, once the happiest and most fortunate of men, had fallen on hard

times. The Emperor Theodoric had (as human emperors are wont to do) tossed him in a dungeon because of some silly dispute over whether Jesus was hewn of the same (or merely similar) substance as God. In between workouts on the stretching rack, Boethius had found time to chat with one Lady Philosophy and record their dialogue.

I didn't think much of this Lady P. She didn't even *try* to spring Boethius from his cell. She brought no cigars, whiskey, or baked goods to cheer him up. The only "consolation" she offered the poor wretch was a series of lengthy harangues.

Boethius laments that he sees evildoers "roused by their impunity to venture on wicked deeds, and by rewards to see them through." He wails that innocent men (presumably himself) are "deprived not only of safety, but also of the right to defend themselves." He asks Lady P to explain how such evil can thrive in a world where God exists.

Lady P's experience with omnipotent beings must differ from my own. All the ones I've ever met say that rewarding the virtuous is so "five minutes ago" and that evil is just more *entertaining* than good. But she told Boethius that God abuses the just "to allow them to put themselves to the test." She cited examples of men whose "glorious death have purchased fame and reverence from posterity" and whose "refusal to cave in before tortures have proved to the world that virtue is unconquered by evils."

Sighing, I closed the book, mindful of the frayed binding. I wished Boethius a less naïve apparition. All this talk of ennoblement through suffering and adversity might work for poetry or drama, but it would never convince that rascal Socrates to drink his hemlock. I slurped the last of my Bahama Mama and slouched into the recliner. I closed my eyes and rubbed my temples. I could hear the Greek windbag's insinuating voice echo in my skull.

"So, Horatio," it said. "Do you crave the fame and reverence of posterity? Do you believe yourself virtuous?"

"No. No! NO. NO!" I tried to shout, but couldn't.

"Then why don't *you* return to Athens and drink the hemlock?"

"NOOOOOOOOO!!!!!!"

Shards of broken glass clinked on black marble. My shout stilled the Prize's writhing. Urgent knocks reverberated from my door. I looked at the wreckage of my Bahama Mama. The orchid lay crushed beneath an ice cube. The umbrella was rent with slivers of glass. The knocking increased in pace and volume.

"I'm coming!" I sucked a deep breath to contain my irritation with what would likely prove a lost troupe of stupid tourists.

I was not expecting a visit from Melpomene. Her eel overcoat offered dryness but little warmth. Dark water dripped from silver hair tangled by the storm's fury. Chalk teeth chattered beneath coral lips, the only color in her thin face. For the first time in my life, I was grateful for her company.

"You could invite me in *before* I drown."

"Yes . . . Ummm . . . Right," I said in the odd mix of stammer and babble that Melpomene's proximity summoned from my speech centers. "Step right in. Let me take that and hang it for you. My, my, Binpriat eel, very stylish and from what I've heard, quite difficult to feed. Something to eat? Can I tempt you with a Bahama Mama?"

Melpomene chafed her hands. A sneeze escaped in a sharp 'phleep.' "Drowning your sorrows with fruity rum drinks and sacher torte?" She cast a disapproving gaze about the circuit of my living room. "I'd expected better of you, Horatio."

"I've not touched a sacher torte in days." My voice swelled with wounded pride.

"What's that smell?"

I looked down at my argyles. "I've got one in the oven."

Melpomene stared at me with that irritating look of triumph she's perfected over our years of rivalry. Beneath a jaunty arc of brow, her gray eyes reflected the fire. With limber hands she tapped a strong chin set beneath lips drawn in a tight oval. I recalled the day I returned to Marisca, laden with the harvest of my Bermuda Triangle and flush with expectations of temporary celebrity. Melpomene had met me at Marisca Terminus, and had struck the same pose. Not one 'hello' or 'welcome home.' Just a gushing announcement that she'd bagged the Lost Continent of Atlantis and was a shoo-in for the Trebukan Prize. I looked to the mantel, where my own Prize was weaving an airy ballet. I hoped her visit would be brief.

"May I?" she asked, her hand hesitant over the Prize's vermiform appendages.

"It's been snapping at visitors," I lied. Stabs of jealousy wrenched at my stomach.

The Prize glowed a dull gold. It purred beneath her expert caress. "I don't think I ever got around to congratulating you," she said.

"You disabled your pancomm the hour it was announced."

She brushed the hair from her eyes. Her chest shook with a throaty chuckle. "I was in no mood for your juvenile gloating."

"Me? Gloat? You know, I've been thinking of brushing up on my gloating. And who should show up on my doorstep but the Queen of Gloat?"

Her hands dropped to her side. Her lip curled in a hurt expression. "I'm not here to gloat, Horatio. I'm here to help."

I felt like I'd just kicked a puppy. "I'm sorry, Mel. Horrible night like this, with rain that would drown a whale pod." The glass wall rattled with a roll of thunder. "Not the sort of night to spend with a man wallowing in self-pity."

Her lips relaxed in a cordial smile. "You'd mentioned a Bahama Mama. Can you leave your wallow long enough to fix me one? Don't forget the umbrella."

I returned minutes later with two coconut bowls. Pink umbrellas leaned against mini daggers skewering pineapple slices and maraschino cherries. I found Mel curled on my sofa, brushing the water from her hair. Dark splotches dotted the priceless Naugahyde. She'd replaced the Gregorian chant with the soft strumming of Mariscan matins jazz. I could not scold her for the sofa.

"Thought it sounded like a mortuary in here." She accepted her Bahama Mama with a grateful nod. Her lips lingered over the straw before her first slurp. "Damn, that's good. Where did you learn to make these things?"

"Nassau, Miami, Hamilton. Thirty years in the Bermuda Triangle. Remember?"

"At least you got something useful out of it." Teasing eyes played above a warm smile. "But enough of the past. What are we going to do about the future?"

"*We*?"

"You're the only other person from Home on this entire planet." She twirled her umbrella about the rim. "I don't want to see your fine tibiae and ulnae littered on the floor of the Curator's office."

"My, Melpomene. I didn't know you cared."

Our gazes crossed. Her gray eyes were the trailing clouds of a passing storm. My left hand crept toward her knee. She opened her mouth. And then she saw the book.

"You aren't going to try more philosophy! Isn't one ignominious defeat enough?"

"It was not an *ignominious* defeat," I said in an indignant voice. "It was merely a

humiliating defeat." She had picked up the volume of Boethius, and was staring at it as if to determine if it were alive. "I was just trying to broaden my horizons, explore new sources of inspiration."

"And?" Her arched eyebrow demanded responses I was reluctant to give.

I sighed, staring into my coconut bowl. "It's hopeless, Mel. Everything I do, everything I try, that Athenian devil just twists and perverts and throws right back at me. It's like that Earth sport, jello wrestling, only with the jello as my opponent."

"You don't have to play by his rules, Horatio. A few minutes with a Triskanian mindwarp or one of those programmable Khalqorn neural cascades would have Socrates begging to return to Earth."

"And where would that leave me?"

"Alive."

"Good point." I set down my drink, struggling for the words to explain. "A month ago, it would have been simple. But now that I've gotten into this philosophy stuff, it's not enough that I just get Socrates back to Earth. I have to do it in a way that's just and right." I wiped my mouth with my sleeve. "I'm not making any sense, am I?"

"Few males do." She rested her hand against my chin. "If this is the way you want to do it, then I think you need some help. You're not a philosopher, Horatio. There must be one someplace that you could approach for advice."

My gaze fell on *The Consolation of Philosophy*. "I think there is." I looked into her gray eyes. "Care for a visit to Earth's sixth century?"

"Are there Bahama Mamas where we're going?"

"I believe the Ostrogothic Empire lacked cane sugar and distilled alcohol."

"Then you'd better make me a second before we leave. And," she added with a playful wink, "you can explain where we're going and what we'll find there."

* * *

Thunder rolled between the Tuscan hills. In the distance, a wolf howled a mournful dirge. Clouds parted to reveal a full moon. Twisted, flying shadows played against its silver disk, bats in search of a meal. Lightning seared the dark sky, a single flash that engulfed in a transient halo the rotting hulk of a stone fortress brooding over the tiled rooftops of Pavia.

Melpomene seized my arm in a vise. "You're really set on this Gothic dungeon thing."

"That's where we'll find Boethius." I stretched my neck so that my chiseled features could dispel her fear and inspire her admiration.

Melpomene laughed aloud. "Then I should have worn my leather/lace ensemble, black lipstick, stiletto pumps, and nose rings."

"Black lipstick?"

Her laughter stopped. Her cheeks screwed in puzzlement. "You don't get it, do you?"

"Nose rings?"

She dealt my arm a friendly chuck. "I'll explain later, after we've escaped from this . . . this . . . Gothic dungeon." Melpomene snorted. I did not question her. She can be taxing, and serious tasks lay ahead.

We found Boethius huddled in a damp corner, draped in putrid rags. The feeble glow of an oil lamp shifted about the cramped dungeon, illuminating a writing desk, a rack of tongs and spikes, and a man-length table bristling with cogs and pulleys. Fresh blood stained its surface.

I marveled at the cruelty of those who would inflict on Boethius the constant companionship of these instruments of torture.

I removed the oil lamp from its sconce and set it on the writing desk. A single quill lay balanced in an inkpot with only a stain for content. Yellowed papyrus sat in a pile, edges trim, as if to announce that the work was finished and the author had moved to other things. I picked up the first page, striving to make out the title in the dim light. *Semitae Desperationis Dolorisque*, it read. The Paths of Agony and Despair.

"What is it?" Melpomene whispered in my left ear.

"Another consequence of my screw-up, I think."

A groan sounded from the corner. Boethius lifted a face tangled in matted hair and an unkempt beard. His intent gaze, the only sign of the sixth century's most educated mind, rested on Melpomene. "So, Philosophy has not abandoned me. In my last hours, she comes to offer comfort and succor."

"He thinks I'm Lady P." A hint of panic crept into Mel's voice. "What do I do?"

"You could try a little comfort and succor."

She kicked my shin instead.

"Most illustrious Boethius," I said over a yelp. "This is not Lady Philosophy, but the Lady Melpomene." I instantly regretted this introduction.

"The Muse of Tragedy?" Boethius's voice grated in panic. Chains rattled from his wrists. "Has it come to this, then?"

Melpomene is not the Muse of Tragedy, though she's pretty good on a dance floor. How she chose that muse's name is another story. What matters to this one was how I might turn this confusion to my advantage. "Tragedy offers us lessons and choices. We can either walk the paths of agony and despair, or take consolation in philosophy."

"Philosophy!" Boethius cried. "I have abandoned philosophy, along with my dignity. I begged . . . *begged* Theodoric to spare my life. I . . . I retracted my denouncement of his heresy." Sobs clawed at the words in his throat. "If he wants to think the Son was fashioned from the vomit of the Father, then what do I care?" His head sagged against his chest.

"This is not good," Mel said.

"You're telling me." The Boethius before us was a shattered vessel, shorn of all nobility and grace. I could not repair it. All I could do was to gather the shards that might assist my own enterprise.

"We seek your advice," I said. The chain-rattling ceased. "For you are known as the wisest of men."

His head arched upward. A glint of pride flashed in his eyes. "What wisdom I have not abandoned, I offer freely."

"I have a friend."

"You are fortunate." Boethius looked about his dungeon. "In these evil times, few men do."

"I must convince my friend to die for the greater good of humanity."

A low whistle seeped through his clenched teeth. "A difficult thing, to convince a man to do that which violates our most basic instincts. Your attempts at persuasion have proven fruitless?"

"If you only knew-"

Melpomene prodded my ribs. She pointed to a key hung on a peg beside the door. I nodded. Tears welled in the prisoner's eyes as we freed him from his shackles. He chafed the

rings gouged in his wrists and ankles, mumbling under his breath. I watched, disgusted with my own crassness and eager for a solution to my problem.

When I could stand the silence no longer, I said, "How do I convince my friend that his glorious death will purchase fame and reverence from posterity?"

The chafing and mumbling ceased. Boethius looked at me, shocked I'm sure by hearing *his* words from *my* mouth. "Will it?" he asked. "How can you be certain?"

I opened my mouth, ready to explain everything, but was silenced by Melpomene's firm grip on my elbow. "I know, though I cannot say why. Let's just take it as a premise."

"Very well then." Boethius stroked his tangled beard. "How to convince a man to die for the greater good?" His words dwindled to a whisper. "How to convince a man to die . . ." The only sound came from the scurry of rats across the dungeon floor.

"I think you have posed the wrong problem," he said at last. "You have assumed that the Good can only be achieved through the subjective exercise of man's free will."

I couldn't recall making any such assumption. But once he'd mentioned it, I realized he was right. "Is there something wrong with that premise?"

Coarse laughter brightened the dungeon's gloom. "A common misperception, friend. Few have ever understood the relationship between the Good, the free will of man, and the designs of Providence."

My pulse fluttered with hope. "Would you care to explain?" I crouched on one knee in front of him.

"The Good resides ultimately in God, who governs all things through himself, the rudder by which the frame of the universe is held steady. Providence resides in God's perfect knowledge of things to come, which knowledge does not control the free will of man but comprehends all that flows from it."

"That's all very interesting. But I have no idea what it means for me and my friend."

Boethius cupped my chin in shattered hands. "Free will is an illusion, perceived only when we choose to act according to the design of Providence. When those choices are forced upon us, the illusion vanishes, even if Providence does not."

"Are you suggesting that I kill my friend?"

"That's not at all what I'm suggesting." His hands dropped to his side. "But in place of rhetoric and logic, you might try less subtle modes of persuasion."

A hand rested light on my shoulder. "I told you so," whispered a gloating voice in my ear.

* * *

Had I known how to gird my loins, I would have done so for my next confrontation. The crowds at Socrates's loggia had thickened since our last encounter. I had to climb a trellis to reach the main promenade, then worm my way past thirty elbows of a Mumphrisit polypod. Airy flutes warbled, while a trio of Lalani veil dancers gyrated on a platform shared with the old charlatan. That, at least, explained the crowds.

"My esteemed colleague returns!" Socrates announced in a booming voice. "What gems of philosophy have you brought with you today?"

"Such gems as ought not be cast before swine."

Shrill dissonance shrieked from the flutes, then silence. The Lalani dancers froze in mid-pirouette. A low rumble coursed through the crowd. An eyebrow arched on the philosopher's wrinkled brow. "Then cast away, Horatio."

"Do you agree that the highest Good resides in God?"

"I believe that I have said as much."

"And the total Good is magnified through acts of Good, but diminished by acts of Evil?"

"That seems a reasonable corollary."

"Do you also believe that Providence directs events to serve the ends of God, in all cases for the increase of Good?"

"I believe we have trod this ground before."

I struck a challenging pose, one arm crossing my chest, with the other on my waist. "What we have not considered is whether there are certain acts which, if intrinsically good, must always be taken, and if intrinsically evil, must in all cases be avoided."

"And what do you think?"

I suppressed the urge to gloat. After weeks of study, I was certain I could beat him. "I think the answer is obvious. There are certain acts, which on account of their intrinsic evil can only obstruct the ends of Providence. Killing, lying, bribery, I could list others if you care."

Socrates regarded me with suspicious eyes. "I suppose that one of those other examples is the avoidance of judgments and justice?"

I strained to maintain my vacuous expression. Socrates fumbled with the folds of his chiton. Would he take the bait? My heart pounded a heavy cadence in my chest.

Socrates turned to the crowd and sighed. "Alas, Horatio has learned nothing from our past encounters. Tell us, Mnipwecht, is killing intrinsically evil?"

"Not in war or self-defense," grunted a tusk-faced Treblat.

"Does anyone here believe that lying is intrinsically evil?"

The Mumphrisit raised forty-six hands.

"Yes, Ooaia?"

"It is not," the polypod sang in a wind chime voice. "When a female ask does this yaiwobo make me look fat, good thing to lie."

"A good thing, indeed." Socrates favored me with an ingratiating wink. "Last is bribery. Does anyone here think that's intrinsically evil?"

A Lalani veil dancer jiggled her prasumbas.

"Yes, Moohawakipi?"

"We give bribe to djaswani-sorubu to make big whoopee." She and her sorority broke into peals of high-pitched laughter. "Good thing, whoopee."

"We shall take your word for it, my good ladies." Socrates turned to me, flush with triumph. "So you see, Horatio, your simple-minded formulation leaves much to be desired. No act is intrinsically good or evil. We must in all circumstances assess the consequences."

"Yet you admit that our senses are flawed?"

"I have said that, yes."

I crossed my fingers beneath the chiton I'd donned for this confrontation. "If our acts are not intrinsically good or evil, and we cannot trust our senses to distinguish between the two, then how can we know right action from wrong?"

"My poor, dear Horatio." The old crank's voice oozed insincerity. "Lost and adrift on the sea of moral dilemma. I have found an inner voice that guides me from the Scylla of self-indulgence and the Charybdis of evil. And it has led me here!" He stretched his arms to a worshipping crowd. "So that the light of my wisdom might banish the darkness of a hundred worlds." He turned to me, his arms relaxed at his side. "I hope that you, too, might one day find an inner voice of your own."

"I already have," I whispered under my breath.

* * *

Melpomene examined the goat hide shield with a look of distaste. A gorgon's head, wreathed in a circle of serpents, leered from its center. She tapped it twice with a spear. "What do you call this thing?"

"It is the aegis," I said. I adjusted the buckles on my armor and fiddled with the straps on my boots. "You make a convincing Athena, Mel."

Her face flushed beneath the beak of her bronze helmet. "You should wear that cuirass more often. It really brings out your pecs."

A dim image, a trick of the light, flickered on the glass of my living room. Melpomene was right. The pectoral plating looked magnificent, but it would never do for daily wear.

"So why is it that I'm dressed up as Athena and you as . . ." Her eyes fished for a name.

"Theseus." I raised a ball of yarn. "The King of Athens who braved the labyrinth of Minos and slew the Minotaur." My hand rested on the controls of a two-way holographic conduit, an expensive toy I'd purchased with my last bonus. "We're going to pay a visit to Socrates."

I flipped a switch, and the space I'd cleared before my fireplace hummed with arcs of light. A silver mass gathered in the center, then coalesced into more tangible forms. Socrates lay on his back on a low bed. His chest rose and fell. I flipped a second switch to activate the auditory accumulators. Teapot snores whistled, setting my teeth on edge.

"You snuck a hol unit into Socrates's bedroom?" Melpomene's voice mixed admiration for my audacity with censure for my law breaking.

"I bribed a housekeeper to sneak it for me." I smiled, recalling the day's argument of moral context. Melpomene raised a questioning eyebrow. I started to explain, but stopped. We had work to do.

"We're going to convince Socrates to return to Athens."

"Dressed like this?" Melpomene shook the aegis at me. "I feel like an idiot."

"Socrates claims to hear a voice, a private spirit that tells him what to do." I checked the tuning and balance. The dials were all centered. "You are dressed as his city's guardian deity. I'm dressed as its greatest hero-king. We're going to give that pompous windbag one hell of a show."

Mel's spear rapped against the floor. "I don't know about this. How do I convince him that I'm Athena?"

"For starters, you could try to act wise and virginal . . . Ouch!" I had forgotten Mel's expertise with Bronze Age weapons. I rubbed at the forming bruise on my knee.

"Any other useful advice?"

She stood erect, the perfect image of the Greek goddess. I nodded and offered an encouraging smile. She allowed me to take her arm and lead her to the projection circle. Visual and auditory accumulators clicked and hummed about us.

"Enable transmission," I said.

My living room vanished, along with the entire Nalipupuktali Coast. We stood within a five-meter circle centered on the sleeping form of Socrates. The projection's circumference shimmered in dark mirrors, a disturbing effect that challenged my perception. I knew that I could step outside whenever I wanted, that a half-eaten sacher torte waited in my refrigerator fifteen yards away. Yet I felt that to cross this border would plunge me into a soul-sucking,

supra-dimensional abyss.

"Are you ready?" I whispered.

Mel squeezed my arm.

I pitched my voice in a dark bass. "Socrates! Socrates! How can you sleep when your native land suffers?"

Socrates snorted twice, and then rolled on his side.

"Socrates!" chimed Melpomene in a voice of lyrical mystery. "The people of Athens cry out with one voice. You dare to sleep through their anguish, and in the presence of their goddess?" She raised her spear, aiming it for the rise of his buttocks.

Socrates snored in blissful ignorance.

"Don't," I whispered. I pointed to the spear. "To him, this is just a projection."

"Right." Mel's face flushed with embarrassment, and, I thought, a bit of anger, too.

She banged her spear against the aegis. A sharp report echoed within the circle. Socrates stirred. "Foolish mortal!" she thundered with Olympian pique. "Rise and do homage to your goddess."

"Wha . . . Wha. . . What . . ." Socrates opened his eyes, then bolted upright in his bed. "Who are you?"

"You dare to wallow in your mock ignorance? You pretend not to know Athena, she of the . . ." Mel hesitated.

"Bright eyes," I whispered, recalling lines from Homer.

"Bright eyes that perceive and understand all?" Melpomene raised the aegis, as if to crash it on the head of the flustered philosopher.

"I . . . I . . . don't believe in you."

"Do you believe in this!" Melpomene thrust the spear within an inch of his nose.

Socrates cringed in the bed's corner. "Who are you?"

"I am Athena!" I enabled an optional feature of the conduit and a silver nimbus enveloped her. "The patroness of Athens, the goddess of the wisdom that you have abandoned. For years you minded my voice, mortal. Why do you choose to ignore it now?" With a flick of another switch, I sent jets of flame to spiral up the shaft of her spear.

Socrates covered his eyes with his hands. He trembled and whimpered.

"You're doing great," I whispered into Mel's ear. "Perhaps you should introduce the living embodiment of the Law of Athens."

"Good idea, I don't think I can keep this up much longer." Her voice wavered with suppressed laughter. "Behold, mortal! For I have summoned from Hades the shade of Theseus, whose Law you have flouted."

I decided to try an Earth strategy known as "good cop, bad cop."

"Dearest child and worthy son of Athens," I said. "Why do you flee the justice of your native land?" I wrung my hands with the anguish of a father chastising a prodigal son. "Does Athens so shame you now that you would turn your back and deny her? Why do you scorn the gentle embrace of her bosom?"

Melpomene snickered. I ignored her.

"Return," I said, extending my arms to invite an embrace of the old mountebank. "Heed the voices that have guided you for so many years."

Motionless, Socrates stared at us.

"Return to Athens." I nudged Melpomene in the ribs.

"Return," she said, in a suitably ethereal voice.

"Return." Gradually, I dimmed the volume on the auditory projectors.
"Return."
"Return."
"Return."
I pressed the "off" button, and my living room returned.
Melpomene dropped her spear and tossed the aegis on my sofa. "Do you think it worked?"
"We'll find out tomorrow morning."

* * *

Socrates shook his fist at a Lalani veil dancer. "Can't you find someplace else for your infernal twisting and wriggling?"

The girl sniffed, gathered her filmy silks, and then stormed off the loggia in a high dudgeon.

"What is it with you people?" Eyes bloodshot from want of sleep surveyed the morning crowd. "Every day it's 'Socrates explain this' and 'Socrates explain that.' I'd hoped you'd have learned to think for yourselves by now, instead of pestering me with your stupid, repetitive questions."

The crowd pulled back from the philosopher. Boldly, I stepped forward. "What's gotten you into this mood, Socrates? Had another chat with your voices?"

* * *

He didn't speak to me on the flight to Earth. Whenever I'd show up in the passenger lounge, he'd just retreat into a corner and mutter over a stack of newspapers. Occasionally, I'd overhear a snippet of conversation between Socrates and himself. Most of it concerned the voices. Where were they? Why were they silent? How would they greet his *return*? By the time we entered Earth orbit, I was convinced he'd gone insane.

I opened my Channel to cell four of the Athens state prison, the morning that a sacred fleet would return from Delos and lift the taboo on executions. "Time to go home," I said. "The place doesn't look all that bad, does it?"

"The food isn't fit for goats." Socrates rose and beat the wrinkles from his chiton. "And I could never sleep with all the rats."

"You won't have to worry about that now."

A sour grin broke through his beard. "No, I guess I won't." He walked into a swirling mass of colors, just as he did the day I abducted him. I followed.

We stepped into a cell lit by violet shades of dawn streaming from a window on the east wall. Socrates stood for a moment, silent and pensive. He shuddered, and then turned to face me. "Why the escort to Athens?"

This question surprised me. I had no idea what he was after. "I was the one who collected you. So I felt responsible for your return."

"Return," he muttered. "Return. Return." I felt the hair rising on the back of my neck.

"So it was you!" he said, pointing a bony finger straight at my chest. "Tricking and cheating me with some futuristic machination. Tell me, Horatio, what tart did you find to impersonate Athena?"

"Her name is Melpomene."

"The Tragic Muse. An apt name for such underhanded deceit." His arm trembled with rage. "Have you no shame? No pride? No philosophy? Since you cannot prevail through honest logic, you end our contest with cheap trickery?"

In a way, I was glad the old fart had figured me out. It gave me the chance for a parting shot. "No act is intrinsically good or evil," I said.

Socrates recoiled, stung by the force of his own words.

"We must in all circumstances assess the consequences. Or do you disagree?"

The stunned expression on the philosopher's face gave way to a sardonic grin. He extended his hand and clasped my arm. "You are a worthy adversary, Horatio."

"Die with honor, Socrates. Much depends on it."

I opened a Channel and stepped from a prison cell in the Golden Age of Athens . . .

. . . into a prison cell in sixth century Pavia. Boethius huddled in a damp corner, draped in putrid rags. The feeble glow of an oil lamp shifted about the cramped dungeon, illuminating a writing desk, a rack of tongs and spikes, and a man-length table bristling with cogs and pulleys. Fresh blood stained its surface.

I removed the oil lamp from its sconce and set it on the writing desk. A single quill lay balanced in an inkpot with only a stain for content. Yellowed papyrus sat in a pile, edges trim, as if to announce that the work was finished and the author had moved on to other things. I picked up the first page, striving to make out the title in the dim light. *De Consolatione Philosophiae*, it read.

I looked to Boethius's unconscious form and smiled. He had found his consolation in philosophy, and so had I.

The End

Gene Spears is an attorney who lives in Houston, Texas. He's a big fan of the Astros, the HGO, and the local cuisine. Though he's probably related to Britney, he's never bothered to sit down and connect the dots.

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readied their razor claws.

A liscrag parted the brush and walked into the clearing. It looked around and then slightly bowed to the mighty ape. It carried no weapon. It was as tall as Jagwog's shoulders, and a head or two taller than the jungle people. Clothed in gray robes, the walking lizard threw back the hood of its cowl, smirking much the way a master would at its slave.

Jagwog ordered the hogclans to relax, though he still tightly gripped his club.

"I trust you have fed well?" the liscrag hissed.

Jagwog shifted uneasily. "I've lived up to the bargain, Gordt. Why do you trouble me?"

Gordt smiled even more. It walked over to him and patted Jagwog's cheek. "What's wrong, you overgrown monkey, still don't trust me?"

It was all Jagwog could do not to shred Gordt's body in two. But a pact was a pact, no matter how much he hated this liscrag. He pounded his chest in rage and then bellowed a roar into Gordt's face, flakes of meat flying out and sticking to the liscrag.

Gordt nibbled on his bottom lip with needle-like teeth, still managing to smile at the same time. "The queen has been pleased that you've kept the borders safe from the radderbacks. Your…" he picked off a piece of dead flesh from Jagwog's chest for emphasis, "condition has been of great service. You'll be happy to know that she has a new plan for you now."

Jagwog had profited by the old bargain. He kept a few of the hairy night creatures out of the western jungle in return for fresh, human meat. It had worked for years. Now Gordt threatened to change the profitable arrangement. Something wasn't right—his instinct told him that much.

It was Jagwog's turn for emphasis. He reached down and plucked a scale off the liscrag's neck, a small pocket of blood pooling underneath. Even though Jagwog knew it hurt the lizard, Gordt didn't flinch. "I am not interested in change." He flicked the scale into Gordt's face.

The smile faded from the liscrag's face. "Jagwog, this is a better deal than you've ever had. The queen has promised to return your mortality."

Very little in life or death caught Jagwog by surprise. He had broken enough heads and tasted enough insanity to prepare him for anything. Anything but this. He stood in shock, holding his breath.

"Yes, she promises to use her connection with the spirits to restore your life. You will lose some of your strength and resilience in battle, but will breathe life again."

Jagwog gulped. "In return for what?"

"You become her personal bodyguard. She has new threats and requires someone with your renowned power. When your service is up, she'll grant you back your life. However…," Gordt leaned in so the hogclans couldn't hear, "you must prove that you're as strong as I say you are. You must kill her four bodyguards."

Jagwog glared down at the scheming liscrag, waiting for the ugly creature to erupt in laughter at the joke. If it did, Jagwog would rip off more than just a scale or two. This was nothing to joke about. Killing a liscrag was forbidden. It would break the pact! Its smile, however, slipped away and Jagwog could see that Gordt was deadly serious, even impatient.

For the first time in his undead existence, Jagwog tasted fear. He wasn't sure if he liked this new emotion or not. It made him feel more alive, yet uncertain and hesitant.

Gordt continued to whisper. "Tonight, at midnight, the queen and her four bodyguards will visit the spirit waterhole. She expects you to act then."

"No. I won't."

"Jagwog, this is the only time she will offer you this. I wouldn't disappoint her if I were

you."

"Then why doesn't she ask me herself?"

"If her guards see you two talking, they won't fully attack tonight—they never harm a queen's ally, even if their lives are at stake. She needs an untainted demonstration."

Jagwog didn't know what to think. He didn't want to refuse the queen's generous offer but was afraid to break their pact, even if she requested it. His mind raced, trying to decide. He twisted his head. "I will keep honoring the old agreement. Nothing more."

Gordt slightly nodded. "I will let your absence speak for you. You have until midnight to decide. If you lack the courage to show up, the queen will realize she was mistaken in you. The offer will not come again."

The liscrag moved to leave, but paused to stoop and pluck a flower with yellow and blue petals, inhaling it deeply. "I can't imagine a life without the sense of taste. Touch. Smell."

Gordt fixed a final cold glare on Jagwog. "Choose carefully. You won't have another chance, I promise you."

The liscrag dropped the blossom on the jungle floor and left.

Jagwog's insides ached. He snatched up the flower, hoping for even a small scent. Nothing. Even the slight remnant of sensory stimulus the human flesh provided was already completely gone.

It had been so long since he had fully smelled, or truly tasted, or felt at ease. He wondered if the queen could really restore what was lost forever, to break his undead curse. No, he decided, of course she couldn't.

Still, if she could …

Jagwog pushed the ludicrous thoughts from his mind. It was impossible. Nobody was that powerful. He would have heard of such an ability by now.

Nightfall soon darkened the jungle. A thousand different insects chirped in an ancient rhythm. A thousand more buzzed around hunting the ones making the music. Prosper bats and night sparrows darted back and forth, eating every bug they could find.

The night soothed Jagwog like nothing else could. It made him feel more at ease. Though doomed to be eternally tired, he would not sleep this night. Nor any night for that matter. The only sleep he could ever know would be if his eyes closed forever in true death. Leaning against a giant tundra tree, his mind relaxed to the darkness as he watched from a distance the large fire the hogclans had built. Midnight was fast approaching.

Gordt's words echoed constantly in his head. He still couldn't make sense of it. The queen wanted him to kill her bodyguards, but that couldn't be possible. It was her first rule in the pact: never kill any liscrags, under any circumstances. She made it perfectly clear what would happen to him if he disobeyed her.

Better to play it safe, he decided anew. He would remain as before and would fulfill his part of the bargain. Let her think him a coward.

A ruckus from the hogclans snapped his focus back to his surroundings. Six of the hogclans tossed a couple of their comrades into the fire. They had gotten into a scrap and ended the fight with flames. Those in the pit twisted and screamed for only a few seconds before their skin began to bubble from the heat. Within moments, they were lifeless and smoldering. Then quickly ablaze.

The others cheered.

A small bush mouse scrambled nearby, its mouth carrying a nut. The animal seemed unaware that Jagwog was only a few feet away as it stopped to devour its meal.

Jagwog watched in agony as the little creature happily stuffed its face. Even in life, Jagwog had had no cravings for nuts. But watching the mouse gobble its meal, the hunger within him filled almost to bursting. He would give anything to taste that scrap of food right now. Really taste it.

And then it hit him. Jagwog was commander of hogclans, fiercest fighter in the jungle. He was feared and respected in virtually all corners of the land. Yet for all of that, he was less than this mouse. This mouse, something he could snuff out with a single finger, experienced life more fully than he ever would again.

Jagwog screamed in the torment of the undead, venting years of pent-up fury in a terrifying shriek. The blast of air alone knocked the frightened mouse from its perch. The animal scurried away. Off to safety. Off to sleep with a full belly. And in the morning, it would feast again.

The idiocy of his reasoning finally came crashing down. He was a fool. The queen was offering him life and he was too scared to take it. He was no coward. Jagwog stood high on his haunches, bellowing again into the night. He pounded his chest as he did before all battles.

The queen wanted a worthy bodyguard. She would find one this night.

He ordered his soldiers to follow. He would use them. Play it safe.

Leaping from treetop to treetop, Jagwog eventually reached the queen's watering hole. He quickly dispatched the hogclans into the shrubbery before positioning himself some twenty feet above on a thick chokeweed tree branch overlooking the sacred pool. Midnight was less than an hour away.

Blending in with the dark as only he could do, Jagwog became virtually invisible as he waited for his prey. When they came, he would be ready for them. Killing four guards at once might prove dangerous, even for him. The hogclans needed only to scatter them. They would die in the process, but it was a small price to pay.

He heard them approach some time later. Five liscrags, just as Gordt promised: four guards and the queen. They walked through the clearing into the waterhole, right into his clutches. Jagwog held his breath. It was time.

The hogclans rushed the guards in a foolish frontal attack. Jagwog watched in horror as the guards easily slaughtered all of the hogclans. These guards were much stronger than the typical liscrag.

For a moment, Jagwog didn't move, unsure of what to do. It still wasn't too late to back out. Nobody had seen him yet. But then the vision of the mouse came back. This was his only chance.

As silent as a moon moth, Jagwog dropped from the tree, gripping the battle-worn weapon with both hands. He smashed the club down on the nearest guard's head. The guard's legs drilled into the dirt a few inches before its body flattened.

The next guard hardly had time to raise its spear before the mighty ape crushed its chest. It flew back and thudded against the chokeweed tree, never to fight again.

Jagwog turned to face the last two guards, the queen backing into the water for refuge. The guards huddled shoulder to shoulder. The one on the right clutched a flint sword, the other a jade mace. He didn't wait. He rushed the liscrag on the right and swung the club with fierce anger.

Weapon met weapon. The guard couldn't match Jagwog's strength. Jagwog's club slammed into the liscrag's side, knocking the creature into its comrade. Instantly Jagwog leapt on the two guards and finished the job.

The ape smiled. The queen would be proud.

He turned to face her. She huddled, cowering from him. Her reaction gave him pause. After he'd just proved his strength, she should be happy, not scared. Though something looked different about her, he still approached.

Jagwog kneeled in reverence. "I will be your bodyguard until you grant me mortality. Thank you for this great honor."

"There, you see, your majesty!" A familiar voice screamed from the shadows. "He has broken the pact and desires to harm the crown. I told you he was dangerous."

Gordt strode out of the shadows with a liscrag Jagwog instantly recognized as the queen. The true queen. He had been tricked. Four dozen guards, at least, flanked her with swords ready.

"Very good, Gordt, you shall be rewarded for your service." The queen regarded Jagwog with contempt.

"After all I have done for you, you violate our pact." She spat at him, and made warding signs with her claws. "I sentence you to death. You will be drawn and quartered, then buried in the ashes of the Resplendent Oak. I know the ways to eradicate even your kind."

Jagwog screamed in protest, but the entire squadron of soldiers rushed him at once.

In response, he snatched the imposter queen and held her in front of the onslaught. "Stop! Gordt lied to us both. I would never violate the pact. He said you wanted this."

"To kill my subjects?" The queen looked at him as though he were a lunatic. She addressed her soldiers. "Kill her too if you must, but he doesn't leave alive."

Jagwog threw aside the prisoner, realizing she was of no worth to him, and met the soldiers head on.

He swung with his club, crushing the closest two in one swing, but others immediately took their places. A sword pierced his leg. Numb pain traveled the length of his torso at the intrusion. He snapped loose the sword and crushed the offending liscrag's chest. The reptilian form thrashed and kicked, fighting for breath that would never come again. Blood spilled from its maw.

Another swing and one more liscrag soldier slumped into the pool, dead.

"Don't rush in like that, you idiots!" barked Gordt. "Formation!"

The liscrags pulled back and formed a circle, swords inward.

"We must take him a piece at a time," Gordt said.

Another knot of soldiers created an outer circle around Jagwog, tightening the noose. They slowly nudged forward as one body.

Jagwog's undead blood seethed. "Gordt, I will drink your blood this night."

The liscrag laughed. "I think not."

There were too many. He had but one chance for survival. First though, he had to distract the tight defenses of the circle.

The circle tightened. One soldier lunged, and Jagwog dropped low, shattering the liscrag's knees with a kick. In the same motion he snatched a sword from a fallen soldier and spun behind, piercing through the heart the other soldier who had rushed in on his back.

Jagwog watched as other soldiers moved in to fill the gaps. He had to move faster.

A clumsy soldier tried attacking solo, crouching low in hopes of remaining out of Jagwog's line of sight. Jagwog knocked the imbecile's skull completely off its body.

"Why don't you join this circle, Gordt?"

"Because this is as close as I can stand being near your undead stink."

Jagwog roared in anger, facing Gordt. "Then I shall come to you!"

He charged toward Gordt. The soldiers rushed to protect Gordt's escape, as he knew they would.

Hurling his club into the knot of soldiers to add to the diversion, Jagwog spun in the opposite direction and rushed toward the now-weakened section of the circle. The guards couldn't respond to the maneuver fast enough. Jagwog broke past their defenses, gripping one of the liscrags by the throat and carrying it off with him.

The helpless creature dropped its weapon and clung with both paws to Jagwog's arm. It scratched futilely at Jagwog while it gasped for air.

Jagwog stooped midrun to snatch the sword, then climbed the chokeweed tree with his prey in hand. He had to be fast. Though no match for him, the liscrags were good climbers.

When he reached the top of the tree, he gave the liscrag soldier's neck a hard twist. The soldier's body went limp. With a massive jerk, he ripped an arm out of the corpse's socket. Blood gushed forth from the opening.

Jagwog threw the limb down on his assailants below, hoping to at least give them pause. Already several were climbing the tree after him.

Jagwog picked up the soldier's sword and closed his eyes tightly against what he had to do next. There was no other way. Nor time to wait. In one motion, he severed his own arm just below the shoulder.

Black smoke and ash billowed forth from the wound. He shoved his limb on top of the bloodied and gaping hole left on the liscrag in preparation for the combining. The massive arm could not fit into the opening of the smaller creature. But it didn't have to. Not yet, anyway.

Jagwog leaned to the union of his arm and the fallen liscrag, lending breath to seal the grafting. The acrid air from his lungs triggered the mutation. Blood blackened and congealed at the wound, gripping Jagwog's limb eagerly to the liscrag's body as a replacement arm. The liscrag's body latched onto the massive arm, pulling it over the hole left by Jagwog's attack and fusing to attach the undead arm.

The flesh began to roil and twist as it grew. Its eyes fluttered open, then closed, while sickening sounds rose forth from the distorted gullet.

Shrieks came as the mutation brought air again into the lungs of the undead creature being forged of two drastically different beasts. The creature continued to churn in grotesque angles. The mass of scaled and muscular flesh became covered in dark patches of hair. Its reptilian eyes broadened, its snout flattened, and its very body seemed to attack itself as if grappling with some hideous disease.

Even Jagwog feared the cross-race result of the undead combination.

The liscrags below stopped their ascent and stared in open horror at the transformation. One even dropped from the trunk, retreating into the thicket.

Jagwog grinned. Soon they would all run. But not soon enough to save themselves.

He faced his undead offspring. "Come to me, brother. Fight for Jagwog!"

The undead nightmare shrieked once more. Before unleashing it, Jagwog gripped his dead brother by the nape of its neck. Confused, the monster looked to Jagwog for guidance. In response, Jagwog pointed to a terrified Gordt below.

"That one's mine."

Once the creature nodded understanding, Jagwog released him. With lightning speed, the two of them descended the tree and tore into the enemy like the east wind into a pile of dried leaves. Even with one arm, the undead ape flung the enemy with the ferocity of a thundering tornado.

Gordt didn't linger. With a handful of soldiers, he quickly disappeared into the jungle.

The limb brother was truly ferocious, proving deadlier than even Jagwog. Its claws had thickened and grown at uneven angles into hideous but effective blades. True to liscrag training, it used them to slash out the throats of its enemies. The meager weapons of the liscrags all but bounced off its mutated hide, which seemed nearly impenetrable.

Jagwog nodded in satisfaction that his limb was well spent. He would indeed drink Gordt's blood this night. His own life was forfeit—these soldiers were not a hundredth of the queen's command that would be unleashed on him for having broken the pact. But at least that snake, Gordt, would die with him.

After retrieving Jagwog's bloodied club, the two undead beasts charged in the direction Gordt had fled. The reptilian scent was still fresh.

"There he is, brother!" the creature hissed. Its voice was truly repulsive, even to Jagwog.

Gordt was summoning soldiers around him, not that that would save him.

Jagwog didn't wait. He charged forward with a death roar, his limb brother right beside him. The soldiers didn't scatter at the attack, but seemed to regard the pair as death on the winds.

Swords hacked and pierced, claws lashed out and scratched, but they crumbled before the might of Jagwog and the creature as twigs before a flame. All the bodies lay broken, most at the hand of the undead limb brother. It yanked free the swords that were imbedded in its gnarled flesh.

Jagwog gripped Gordt by the throat. The cowardly liscrag lacked even the courage to watch Jagwog finish. He closed his eyes tight and quivered like a babe.

Jagwog roared at the miserable creature, and then threw him to the ground. He pinned the writhing form down with one foot and reached down to rip the head off.

"Brother, wait," the creature said.

Jagwog checked his rage for a moment. "He must die. He has cost me my life—half life though it may be."

He placed his large fingers on the liscrag's head, testing the strength of the skull. He smiled; he broke klongo nuts easier than this.

The limb brother leaned closer. "But the queen can learn the truth. That he tricked you. She has a way."

"It's too late. I've already killed so many."

Scraps of the limb brother's former self, his memories and intellect, were struggling to surface. Some remnant of those memories would still be intact, Jagwog knew.

"The queen places great value on the truth," the creature said. "You must try."

The creature was right. At least they had a chance if they could prove the truth. Jagwog glared down at Gordt, who had since opened his eyes. "He doesn't need both arms to tell the truth."

Ignoring pleas for mercy, Jagwog ripped Gordt's arm off with a single yank. The shrieks of pain were music to his ears. Before scooping up the pathetic form, Jagwog lowered himself to the earth and drank deeply of the hot blood flowing from the jagged wound.

Jagwog licked his lips and stood over the writhing form. "Promise fulfilled." He tossed the limb to his brother, with permission to eat it. The limb brother greedily did so.

He shredded a strand of cloth from Gordt's bloodied shirt and tied a tourniquet at the shoulder, just above where the arm had separated from the body. He doubted the queen would listen, as his brother suggested, but he wouldn't have Gordt bleeding to death on the slim chance

that she would.

Jagwog turned to his limb brother. "You must fight strong for me. The guards will think I am coming to kill the queen. We must hurry before she reaches her army."

With a last glare at his enemy, Jagwog leaned down and threw the screaming animal over his shoulder and ran towards where he had last seen the queen.

They reached the pool, and to his shock, she hadn't left its shores. All of her soldiers were guarding her; only two dozen were left. Not nearly enough to stop them, Jagwog realized. He stopped, uncertain how to begin.

The queen stared them down with an unreadable expression. "I know we don't have the forces to stop you here. But several runners have already been dispatched to bring my army, which will kill you if I am dead, or on my command."

She gestured to the woman who had been dressed as the queen. "You did not kill my surrogate when you had the chance. Though you have wounded Gordt, you have not killed him. Something isn't right here. Against my better judgment, I grant you one chance to explain what is going on."

Jagwog hurled a nearly unconscious Gordt over the ring of soldiers, landing at her feet. "Gordt tricked me, saying you wished this, as I told you before. My limb brother said you can make him tell the truth. Do so now, or I will kill Gordt and anybody that stands in the way. Your army won't be fast enough to save you from that."

She scowled at him and his new undead companion, uncertainty playing across her face. Finally, she spun to the pool and began rapid hand and arm motions, whispering urgently to the waters. Tentacles of water erupted from the still pool. They twisted as though alive and sought out the still form of Gordt. At their icy touch Gordt leapt to his feet, glassy eyed.

"What do the spirits wish?" a monotone voice called out from Gordt's throat, though clearly not his own.

"Gordt, what were your intentions here tonight?" the queen asked. "And leave nothing out."

"To seek your trust through deceiving this ape. He believed you would grant his mortality back if he helped you."

"And to what end did you wish my trust?"

"To kill you and assume your throne."

The queen was so surprised that she released the power upholding Gordt, and he tumbled unconscious to the ground. The truth magic severed. She turned to Jagwog, flustered.

Jagwog nodded in approval. "I never would have broken the pact."

No one spoke. They all stared at each other. In the distance, angry war drums thumped. The army was approaching.

The queen finally broke the silence, glancing down at Gordt. "Do you realize that in order to give back your mortality, Jagwog, the spirits need the life of one living?"

Jagwog shook his head.

A guard near her leaned in, his eyes wide. "Your majesty, no matter how filthy a crime, a liscrag's life is worth far more than this despicable ape!"

She didn't reply. The drums were beating closer. Already, Jagwog could hear faint shouts and cries from the queen's army. There wasn't much time left. He gulped, wondering if he was wrong to listen to his limb brother.

"You spared my life when you knew you were deceived," the queen said. "It's time I do us both a service."

Jagwog gulped again.

She took a step closer to Jagwog. "The radderbacks aren't much of a threat anymore, thanks to you. As a mortal, your life will change. Your habits—we won't need to provide jungle people any longer. Besides, I need to teach my people the price of treason. If you are willing, Jagwog, I will use Gordt's life to transfer life, real life, into your veins."

Jagwog didn't blink. He could hardly believe what she said. Without hesitation he blurted, "Of course."

The queen smiled. "I thought you would agree. Once this is completed, you must leave the western jungle forever. You must find your life in a new place."

"I would be honored."

The queen then commanded the guards to place Gordt's body into the sacred waters. Eyes closed. She began whispering to the spirits, calling upon their power. A beam of light descended on Jagwog and Gordt.

Everything inside Jagwog swirled. And then he felt it. His heart fluttered and beat. A beat that was full of life. He had forgotten how wonderful this felt. That he could feel!

Before the final transfer was complete, Gordt suddenly jolted awake, clearly aware of what was happening. He screamed as the final portion of his life was sucked through the light and into Jagwog's body. Once finished, Gordt's body was scarcely more than a shriveled pile of dust and scales.

Happier than he had ever been, Jagwog roared with all his might. He then turned to his limb brother with a smile. However, the limb brother had fallen dead, unable to sustain the undead existence alone. Jagwog nodded, happy to know his brother now found his rest.

The queen suddenly shouted. "Jagwog, you must go now. Quickly, before my army arrives—they may act in anger before consulting me. You will live without your arm, but you will live free." She smiled.

He bowed low in reverence and gratitude, and then darted off. Scrambling across the jungle treetops, he searched for his new home, inhaling the fresh air.

The End

Lars Benson and Dave Dickson are screenwriters for a motion picture studio (unfortunately, their scripts haven't been made into anything big yet). Their writing has also appeared in magazines, travel guides, stage plays, and the occasional mind-numbing government document. They are currently writing a fantasy novel, fantasy being their first love.

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The rich melody of Ndege's voice was a familiar sound to Harmon. The reserved Kenyan had crewed for him many times and they had become friends over the years. To her, the environment aboard ship was home. As one of the first humans ever born off-Earth, she had spent more of her childhood flying down compartment tubes than she did climbing trees. Traveling planet-side made her anxious, she would explain. She preferred gravity that she could control.

There were fourteen total aboard their ship, the *Polaris*, but most of the crew was in stasis for the long journey out to the Asteroid Belt. Twelve oblivious souls, computers filling their brains with the latest geological surveys and training routines. All while Harmon and Ndege made sure they got safely from Lunar orbit to the outer colonies.

"I noticed that the *Corsair* was drifting back a little," Harmon explained. "Did we miss a course change?"

"No, we're on track," she replied. "Maybe they've got business on Mars. Wouldn't be the first time Tara's carried something special for the governor."

"Something so important that it's worth jeopardizing the bonus on this run?" Harmon asked. "Never happen. It'd kill her to lose to us."

Ndege laughed.

"Let's get 'em on the horn and see what's up," Harmon said. "I'll come down to engineering and we can conference there."

* * *

From the minute he saw Tara on the view-screen, Harmon knew there was a problem. "Ndege says that you guys are having trouble keeping up. Anything we can do to help?"

Tara's demeanor was usually quite cool, but she had an edge to her voice that was uncommon, even for her.

"I'm sure you're calling to offer help, Commander. Pardon me, though, if I sound a bit skeptical," she said.

"Ah, c'mon, Tara. You know that the last thing we want is for you guys to get into trouble out here. Come in a few hours behind us, sure. But you don't have to wreck a ship to do that. What's going on?"

Tara sighed. "The computer thinks we've lost Deuterium containment, but we can't verify it. Seems like a programming glitch, but we've had to shut down the engines just in case."

Harmon saw Reston working behind her. He was an engineer like Ndege, maintaining the critical systems on the transports, sometimes coddling them like children. Reston was especially gifted in dealing with the onboard computers. Normally.

"Reston, of all people, has a bug in one of his computers?" Harmon chuckled.

Harmon certainly got the reaction he was looking for. Reston jerked his head towards the view-screen and glared for a second before remembering his rank. "With all due respect, sir, I didn't write the crappy algorithms. Some idiot back on I6 did. But I get to deal with it."

Reston knew more about the neural systems, and sims in particular, than all present company combined. Usually that was a big advantage for them.

"Are you venting fuel, ma'am?" Ndege eased into the view, being careful not to look like she was pushing Harmon aside.

"No, Lieutenant," Tara replied. "That's why I think it's just a glitch somewhere. But Reston can't find it, so it's a bit frustrating. I decided we should err on the side of caution."

"Perhaps we should drop back to help," Harmon offered.

"Uh-huh. Give it a rest, Commander. We both know you're not going to do that. That shipment bonus is just as critical to you as it is to us. Just don't get too over-confident. We'll be passing you soon enough."

"Alright, then. Can't say we didn't try."

Tara rolled her eyes. "*Corsair* out."

* * *

From simspace, the growing distance between the two transports was readily apparent. At close range, the internal environments of each vessel would merge into a community where separate crews could interact without leaving their ships. The *Corsair* appeared now to Harmon as merely a small beacon in the "sky", shrinking steadily as it competed for his attention with the other celestial members in view: The Sun and Earth, millions of kilometers behind; Mars off to the side.

Harmon turned his attention back to the local view, where his simvisage hovered above a depiction of the ship's cargo section. In realspace, Ndege was actually moving through the massive hold, inspecting containers while Harmon kept watch. She wore a standard EVA suit to navigate through the unpressurized hold. Harmon hated wearing the bulky suits, but Ndege never seemed to mind. Today, she moved quickly in the zero-G environment.

With thousands of sensor tags in the hold and on each container, physical inspections should have been unnecessary. Theft was not an issue; where would a thief go? But Ndege was notoriously cautious. She insisted on looking for unauthorized energy signatures, leaks or damage that might have gone unnoticed during the loading. Yes, it was probably a big waste of time, she would admit. But what else did they have to do? Harmon's mind wandered as he watched her follow the same standard routines over and over, moving through the maze of containers.

Harmon was gazing off into the horizon, when he suddenly noticed a strange reflection on one of the nearby containers. He watched closely as a shadow appeared above Ndege's figure. She couldn't see it from realspace, but from his view, it was only a few meters from her. Harmon quickly reached for an audio connection.

"Ndege! Don't move. We've got company," Harmon said.

"Company? What do you mean?"

"I see a shadow," Harmon said. "A simspecter. It's right above your head."

Ndege ducked instinctively. "Well, get it away from me!" She swung her hand like she was swatting a fly. The specter flipped up the wall.

"Hold on. You spooked it," Harmon said.

Ndege quickly backed away from the container and scanned the wall, looking for the intruder. She switched on her neuroptics, but the specter moved swiftly over the top of the container. By the time she came online, it was gone.

"I don't see it." Ndege replied as she quickly scanned the surface of the building-sized container.

Harmon zoomed closer. "It flew over the top and down into the gap. It's between the containers. Try blocking the exit from the side and I'll come at it from the top."

Ndege moved quickly around the corner. Harmon adjusted his perspective to the narrow separation between the containers and refocused. As his resolution increased, Harmon saw

clearly what was waiting for them. Ndege gasped as she saw it. A large opening had been ripped in the simmatrix, less than a meter up the sectioning wall.

From realspace, nothing would seem out of the ordinary, but in simspace, the matrix represented a barrier between the virtual environment and the ship's internal computer systems. A breach in that partition presented many potential problems because it allowed unauthorized access to critical systems. Harmon and Ndege both knew that and moved cautiously; the specter floated directly in front of the tear.

"So how long do you think this thing's been hiding down here?" Ndege said.

"I don't know. It's probably part of some practical joke that Andrews set up before he went under. A little surprise for us when we're least expecting it. I'm actually a bit disappointed. The thing isn't half as scary as he could've made it."

"Can we just delete it?" Ndege asked.

"Probably not. I'm sure he thought of that. This has got Andrews' fingerprints all over it. Unfortunately, the lieutenant—or should I say *corporal*, after I get done with him—didn't account for this thing getting loose in the real network. We've got to be careful here."

"Maybe we ought to just reinitialize the matrix and clear it out," Ndege said.

"We could, but the engines'll throttle back automatically if we do that. I don't want to lose any extra advantage we might have gained on Tara in the last few hours."

Harmon's simvisage now floated right above the specter. "I'll just try to isolate it."

Harmon visualized a barrier surrounding the creature and the computer promptly complied. Instantly, a set of vaporous walls appeared to enclose the specter and separate it from the breach. The specter reacted quickly though, before the barrier solidified. In the span of an instant, it subdivided, sending a portion of itself diving into the breach while the remainder hovered above the deck-plating.

"Damn thing! How'd it..."

Before Harmon could finish, he was interrupted by the sharp sound of alarm horns. Startled, Ndege looked straight to the bright red lights now flashing on the walls of the cargo hold.

"Sir, we've got a real problem now," Ndege said. She quickly switched her neuroptics to the standard 'head's up' display. "It seems like our new little friend may have had more access than we thought. Command is reporting failovers in several systems, life support and main engines included."

"Blast it! We're gonna get caught in a shutdown now anyway. I better go after it. Can you deal with the failures?"

"I'll try," Ndege replied.

Harmon didn't wait for her response. He quickly visualized himself entering the breach. The computer executed the command, dissolving his view of the matrix and plunging him into the ship's network. Harmon struggled to get his bearings as he was immersed in a roaring stream of data. By instinct, he caught his breath, as if there was a risk of drowning. His viewpoint stabilized while he hurriedly looked around for the specter.

The creature materialized several meters upstream. Even at a distance, Harmon realized that the creature did not have a constant shape, its surface undulating as it slowly rotated in place. The effect was strangely hypnotic. Harmon had to force himself to look away, focusing instead on the constant stream of data flying past them. It felt like a January blizzard to him, having grown up in northern Dakota, with data packets taking the place of snow flurries. He could almost hear the wind howling, although in simulation there was no sound, only deathly

quiet. Harmon knew these images were created for his benefit alone and did not really exist but that reality did not lessen the effect. He marveled at the majesty of the storm.

Harmon slowly moved closer to the specter. As he approached the creature, he realized that he had very little idea how he was going to apprehend it, or if he could. *I'll think of something*, he thought.

Suddenly, the specter released whatever anchor it had in the virtual stream and came shooting directly toward him. Harmon barely had time to react. He thought they were going to collide, but at the last second, the specter shot past him into the storm. Harmon spun around to pursue it.

The specter moved very fast, steadily increasing its speed in response to Harmon's pursuit. Deeper into the network they flew, racing past dozens of junction points and alternate pathways. Harmon labored to keep the creature in his sight. He started to grow anxious as he wondered what the creature intended. *Could it bring down the network? Could it harm the ship?* At the edge of his view, Harmon could see his status display and realized that the failure alarms were still active. *What is taking Ndege so long?*

Harmon felt increasingly tired. A dull headache increased in intensity as he struggled to focus. His vision started to blur. *Hurry up, Ndege! I'm losing it!* Something was wrong, something he had missed. As he continued to accelerate, as the specter slipped further and further away, he knew he had only seconds to hold on. His thoughts and the fury of images coursing through his brain started to merge together. He was slipping and couldn't stop the process. Then the lights went off—and the last thing he remembered was the darkness.

* * *

Reston had loaded and reloaded the entire set of containment protocols and control heuristics, but the computer still wouldn't give the green light. So he decided that there must be a failure in one of the controller cards, something that would appear like a software glitch. Fortunately, they had a spare. In truth, they had two replacements for every single component on the ship. The difficulty was that obviously none of the engineers had ever tried to replace this particular part outside of dry-dock, because it required a reset on several related systems, including air generation. So they had to vent the entire crew area to complete the repair, and then use a fair amount of oxygen reserves to get the system back to pressure. Minutes turned to hours as the process dragged on.

Tara just sat in her evac suit watching, waiting, and offering what little assistance she could to Reston's repair efforts. She was amazed at their luck, or lack thereof. Could a more important component have failed at a worse time?

"Reston, how much longer?" she asked.

"We're almost there, Tara. I'm just reloading the last subcontroller; then we should be able to try it again."

"Good. If we can get those engines restarted soon, we might somehow catch the *Polaris*."

"Yeah, just maybe..."

Reston had a look on his face that Tara had seen before.

"Reston, what aren't you telling me?"

"Oh, nothing. I just have a feeling that the crew of the *Polaris* is having a few challenges of their own right now."

"Reston... What did you do?"

He didn't answer right away, but as Tara stared at him with an increasingly narrow gaze, she knew that the answer wasn't good.

"You did something to their ship, didn't you?"

Reston's face turned very serious. "It's fine. I didn't do any damage. I just released a little virus into their network that should slow them down a bit. Just a little something to even the odds."

"Reston! I can't believe you'd do something like that!"

Reston just stared back at her. "Tara, we both know how important this contract is. If they get to Ceres first, we're sunk. We need that bonus. If we don't get those credits, we're through. Finished. Do you really think I was going to just sit here and let them ruin us?"

She didn't have anything to say.

"It'll be ok," he said. "If they're smart, they'll immediately shutdown primary systems and dump their entire matrix. That'll completely purge the virus. If they don't think of that or get stubborn and decide that they can capture or kill it, they'll likely end up chasing it around a bit. Worst case, it'll shutdown a few systems and shake 'em up a little. Nothing they can't handle. By that point, we'll be waving at them on the way by."

Tara had a sick feeling in her stomach, but it was mixed with a familiar desperation that she had been laboring with for the last several months. Reston was right; they had to get to Ceres first. So as guilty as she felt, self-preservation came first. She suddenly had a little hope.

"Can they trace it to us?"

Her question prompted a small chuckle from Reston. "No. It shouldn't be traceable. No one will ever know but us."

* * *

Ndege quickly discarded her EVA suit in the airlock and scurried through the inner hatch. She had chosen the nearest available exit to save time, but that left her at the far end of the ship's cargo suspension. Ndege had a long distance to cover as she hurried down the corridor tube that ran toward the command section of the ship.

She was breathing heavily by the time she reached the junction. "Blasted artificial grav," Ndege murmured to herself. "Should've turned that down before I even came down here." Her hands were shaking nervously as she tapped in the required codes to open the hatch to the main vessel.

The doorway sprung open. Ndege jumped through immediately, but badly misjudged the difference in height between the two sections. She tripped, falling hard to the deck plating. Grimacing in pain, Ndege lay sprawled out on the floor for a few moments catching her breath. "Gotta keep it together, Lieutenant." She slowly pulled herself up to her knees. The corridor lighting pulsed red, urging her on. She raised herself up and started down the corridor again, limping a bit as she went. "No more running; we'll get there fine like this."

Reaching the center of the ship at the mid-junction, Ndege grabbed the first ladder and scrambled down into the engineering section. She hurried to the primary control station and started flipping switches. She heard a series of satisfying clicks behind her as the engine controllers physically disabled their interconnects to the main computer. "Ok, that's good." The controllers themselves shifted into fail-safe mode, effectively killing the main engines. Ndege felt the subtle change in ship vibration, confirming the shutdown. She felt her heart rate start to settle. "Ok. Now, let's get life support."

Ndege turned to another set of panels, flipping more switches. She paused, looking up at the wide series of indicator lights, some blinking, but most steady. No change in connection status. All green. Ndege blinked her eyes and wiped the sweat from her face. "Wrong answer." Her eyes raced back over the panel, reviewing the switch positions: Down, up, down, down, up, down. "That should have done it." She reversed the switches, then carefully set them again. Nothing.

Ndege turned quickly to another panel with the environmental controllers and scanned the readouts: Temperature, water, waste, atmosphere. All appeared normal; then she reached the air supply to the forward fuselage. Complete shutdown. Worse yet, the section was depressurizing. "Oh, no!" Ndege started to panic as she remembered how the commander liked to sit in the cockpit while in sim. "Harmon...!"

Ndege immediately ripped off the protective front cover of the oxygen controller and frantically started pushing buttons on the faceplate. "C'mon, c'mon. System; Main; Primary Functions; Restart. Ok. Confirm. Yes, blast it, I'm sure!" The controller thought for a second or two, then beeped angrily back at Ndege.

Cannot comply. All access linked to primary flight controller.

Ndege slammed the side of her fist into the faceplate in frustration. She grabbed the front handles on the controller and strained, pulling and stretching. It came free abruptedly, throwing her backwards onto the deck plating. She expected one of the backup controllers to automatically engage, and a new set of urgent red lights confirmed the switch. Ndege reached back up to the new controller, but it confirmed her fears: it was locked in the same routine.

Not wasting another moment, Ndege hurried to the ladder and scrambled back up the steps. She quickly reached the main corridor, but continued climbing into the upper transits. The hatch to the command module was closed. As Ndege released the seals, air rushed past her like a wind burst into the module. For a moment, Ndege feared a breach, but she hoped the atmosphere would hold for a few minutes. She charged into the corridor, moving quickly toward the cockpit. The cockpit hatch was also closed, but not sealed. Ndege yanked it open in one motion. "Harmon?!" she called as the door came free. Ndege had to steady herself in the doorway, feeling the effects of exertion in the oxygen poor atmosphere. She struggled to catch her breath while entering the cockpit.

As expected, the commander was strapped into the pilot's chair, motionless. Harmon had clearly not left simspace, but his slumped posture was far from normal. "Harmon!" Ndege pushed him roughly on the shoulder. "You've gotta wake up. There's no life support up here." Harmon didn't move. Ndege reached behind Harmon's head for an oxygen mask that she slipped on his face. "Of course, you didn't bother to follow a single safety procedure," she scolded.

Harmon's face was very pale. Ndege then felt a chill run through her body, "You really don't look very good, Commander." She quickly checked his pulse. Nothing. Frantically, she tore open the medic kit below the center console and grabbed a portable stimulator. The device emitted a high-pitched whine as she switched it on. Ripping open Harmon's flight suit, Ndege placed the unit on the side of his chest and activated it. Harmon's body jumped, but then settled back into the chair. Ndege tried again then rechecked his pulse. Still nothing.

Ndege dropped into the adjoining seat as the tears welled up in her eyes. Harmon was dead.

As she sat stunned, Ndege didn't notice that the tiny neuroptic status on Harmon's temple was still blinking. The amber light pulsed on and off. On and off.

* * *

My God! I'm still in simulation.

As the events of the last two days replayed in his mind, Harmon also realized that things had changed dramatically in the matrix. He tried repeatedly to shut down his interface and return to realspace, but the system would not respond. Wonderful. There was also no sign of the specter—*it must have escaped*— and he had no idea what happened to Ndege.

First, Harmon accessed the ship's internal tracking sensors and found the lieutenant. She was in the cockpit. A quick view of the scene there told him more than he wanted to know.

Ndege, I'm right here! Turn on your interface. I'm stuck in here and can't get out!

Ndege couldn't hear him. Harmon called several more times, but gave up in frustration. For the moment, it appeared he was all alone. Harmon felt the anger rise within him as his thoughts turned back to the specter.

Ok, where are you hiding?! Where can I find you so I can do what I should have done at the very beginning?

Listening to himself vent, Harmon acknowledged that the rogue sim program was probably only part of his problem. Someone was behind it; someone had tried to kill them, or him, and unfortunately it seemed like they had succeeded quite nicely.

But they had failed in one important regard: He was still roaming around *in here* and had a hunch that the murderer didn't know that. At least not yet.

Turning his attention to the specter, Harmon searched the cargo hold first. The breach no longer existed, but that was to be expected; automated systems management had probably sealed it. Still, he felt like his best clue was now gone. He searched everywhere he could think of, with little progress. It felt like hours had passed, but Harmon couldn't say what the time really was. If he was dead, then his consciousness only really existed in the computer. If so, were clock cycles the only thing that mattered? Harmon tried to cross into the non-cargo sections of realspace, but Ndege appeared to have sealed them off. Good precaution. Harmon couldn't even get back to the cockpit to stand watch over his own body, which was also good. Frustrating, but good. No hope there worth obsessing about.

I know you're still in here somewhere. But after an extensive search, Harmon couldn't find the slightest trace. He had started to scan the insides of bulkheads, panels and even containers, when, by chance, he looked up.

There, in the virtual sky, he noticed the image of the *Corsair*. It was growing steadily larger. Tara and Reston were catching up. Harmon's mind pulsed with an excited thrill. *Finally, some help. Reston will surely have some ideas on how to get me out of this*. Harmon estimated that the two ships would come close enough to merge sims very soon.

Harmon's excitement was short-lived, however, when he realized that he wasn't the only one to notice the approach. High above, in the virtual stratosphere, he recognized the distinctive shimmer of the specter.

Harmon wasted no time and charged directly at the creature, but as expected, the specter took off flying down into the local environment as he drew near. He chased the specter back through the cargo area, weaving in and out of containers, soaring up and down the corridors. After following the specter for several minutes, and realizing that he wasn't making any real progress, Harmon pulled up. The specter stopped a few meters in front of him.

Blasted thing. I might have to wait to trap you until I get some help.

Harmon shifted his view back upwards, realizing that the *Corsair* was only minutes from

entering range. For a moment, Harmon relaxed, but then it hit him.

How could I be so stupid? Once the environments merged, the specter could jump to the other ship. Then it might kill again.

He had to stop it now.

Harmon gazed one last time into the swirling, hypnotic visage of the specter. He knew his own life was already gone, but he still had that strong survival instinct, so he hesitated. He imagined that the undulating surface resembled a face that he couldn't quite recognize. He started to grow angry as he realized that the final analysis of his life was to be that he died at the hands of a computer virus. How pathetic. But he knew that he had only one chance now, to end it here. Analyzing the memory location of his nemesis, Harmon figured he could transfer his matrix to that exact location, causing a fault. That should effectively delete the creature. Only one problem: His own program would likely suffer the same fate. And this time he wouldn't just wake up with a bit of a headache. He wasn't going to wake up ever again.

Harmon tried to think of something profound to say, but came up with nothing. He just stared back at the specter and executed the command. Once again, his world went black.

* * *

"I assure you, Captain... Prolonging this matter is not in anyone's interest. There are regulations I have to follow, however."

The station's security chief leaned forward as he spoke, propping his elbows on the table in front of him and locking his hands together. Tara and Reston both sat across from him, trying to appear relaxed.

"I understand that, Chief. But we've answered every question that we can. The bottom line is that we had very little contact with the *Polaris* in the days leading up to the accident. I don't know what else we can tell you," Tara said. "The crew of the *Polaris* got into trouble a long way from help. We attempted to render assistance when we could, but by that time, Commander Nelson was already dead. It's an absolute tragedy, but one that comes with the territory. We all know the risks out here."

The chief let out a small sigh, dropping his chin onto his clasped hands. He stared at Tara for several moments then shifted his attention to Reston whose gaze was already fixed intently on him. The chief returned the stare, but shifted directly back to Tara as he spoke again.

"And your opinion of Lieutenant Riymala's story that a virus got into their computers, causing the situation that led to Commander Nelson's death?"

Tara's instinct was to look at Reston, but she caught herself. "I don't know how to respond to that. You said yourself that there was no evidence found to substantiate Ndege's claim. She must've been imagining it. We all know what kind of tricks your mind can play on you when you've been in deep space for extended periods. I've imagined plenty of wild things of myself that I could've sworn were true at the time."

"Yes, I suppose that's the most likely answer," the chief replied. "I guess that leaves only one set of data that hasn't been reviewed."

"And that is?" Tara asked.

"The series of transmissions that passed between your vessel and the *Polaris* in the hours before you lost contact with them. I'd like to review those transmissions, but they're encrypted."

"And so you'd like us to decrypt them for you? That would mean passing over our codes to you, Chief. That's highly unusual."

"I understand, but it's the best way I can put this unfortunate event behind us all."

"And if we don't?"

"Well, then I guess you'll have to stay here until I can complete my investigation by other means. But that could take a while, and I know you're anxious to get back to business."

"In other words, you're grounding us until we cooperate?"

"That's for you to decide, Captain, but we both know that it doesn't have to come to that. What do the codes mean to you? You can always change them as soon as we're done."

Tara knew she had very little choice, but certainly wasn't going to back down immediately. She glared at the chief for a few moments, but eventually turned to Reston and said, "Give him the codes, Lieutenant."

Reston's eyes widened noticeably as he took his turn staring at Tara, but he slowly held out a hand towards the chief, who handed him a small data pad. Reston pulled out a small memory chip from the pocket of his flight suit and inserted it into the pad. After entering a long series of commands into the pad, Reston removed the chip and wordlessly handed the device back to the chief.

"Are we done, then?" Tara asked.

"Yes, Captain. And thank you for being so cooperative."

"We'll be expecting clearance from flight control by tomorrow morning, Chief."

"We'll see, Captain. We'll see."

Reston followed Tara out of the security chief's cabin and they walked in silence, all the way back to the docking level, boarding the *Corsair* as if nothing was out of the ordinary. Once the outer hatch was closed, however, Tara collapsed into the bulkhead and let out the breath she had been holding.

"Did you get the chief's codes?" she asked him.

"Better than that. I think I know now where they're storing the last image from the *Polaris'* computer before it was wiped. Not only can I clean up the transmissions, but I should be able to verify that nothing is left in the image as well."

"Good. Do it...do it all." Tara was shaking as she spoke. "Then let's get as far away from here as we can.

* * *

As he waited, Reston absently fidgeted with the small memory chip he held in his hand. The Ceres station might have been a few degrees colder than the ship, but he didn't notice. There were quite a few people moving through the community area this morning. Reston sat at a small table by himself, staring out the viewport.

After a short while, realizing that he was alone, Reston got up and moved to one of the computer terminals along the wall. He engaged his neuroptics and entered the station's environment. A quick retina scan confirmed his identity to station security as he slipped the chip into a small slot in the front of the monitor. Within seconds, the image was downloaded into the station's main computer, encrypted with a set of codes that he had stolen from one of the other ships docked nearby. If the authorities managed to track what he was about to do, they'd be on another random hunt, looking for someone he didn't even know. When the transfer was done, Reston stood up and casually walked back to the table.

He stared vacantly out the viewport as the data traffic steadily increased between his neuroptics and the station computer. He initialized a sub-matrix to host the environment from

the *Polaris* and quickly linked to the database in use by the investigation team.

Reston dealt with the incriminating transmissions first, carefully replacing key sections with innocuous snippets selected from prior months. Once satisfied, he then located the final memory image from that fateful day many weeks ago. As he combed through the files, he realized suddenly that, at this moment, he held in his grasp answers to questions that no one would ever be able to answer. Once he corrupted the image, no one would ever know what really happened that day, what had really caused Harmon's death. Reston told himself that he didn't care, that it didn't really matter, but knew that that was a lie. Reston liked to believe that the entire incident was really just a set of circumstances gone horribly wrong, that he couldn't be held responsible—he wasn't a murderer. But no matter how many times he tried to convince himself, he always came up short, because he didn't really know. How could he know—he wasn't there. Now, he had the chance to find out, once and for all, and as that thought sunk in, he quickly thought of nothing else.

Reston entered the matrix.

He immediately accessed the hidden control interfaces for the specter's program. The visage of the creature materialized in front of him. Unexpectedly, a rush of emotion came over him as he gazed into the undulating waves of the image. He allowed his mind to drift back to a time before he had activated it, before he decided that they couldn't afford to lose the race to Ceres and needed to explore every possible advantage, including sabotage. At that time, he might have been Harmon's friend. Now, he mourned with everyone else, even as he struggled to save his own skin. Once he had a fix on the specter, he searched for the archives linked to it.

In realspace, Reston closed his eyes to avoid the sensory confusion between the world around and the world inside. Reviewing Harmon's final exchanges with the specter, Reston felt an icy chill work up his spine. He shook his head ruefully—*You had no idea what you were dealing with, Harmon*—as the weight of real guilt descended upon him.

Reston was numb. Then he grew scared. He quickly deleted the archives and prepared to separate himself from the specter.

Cannot comply. Access to command functions limited to proper clearance.

Stunned, Reston tried once more, but the command failed again. And again. Reston felt panic set in as he frantically attempted other commands, but discovered that he had no contact whatsoever with the station environment. He had been cut off somehow. His body started to hyperventilate.

"He-e-e-l-l-l-p... somebody help me..."

The words escaped his mouth, but only in a barely perceptible whisper. There was no one in the community area to hear him.

In his mind, Reston was suddenly aware of another presence. The swirling visage of the specter was still in front of him and it slowly resolved into a face. He knew that face, but the eyes betrayed a great anger that he had never seen before. Fear overwhelmed him as his own voice echoed in his mind.

"How could it be? You're dead!"

The image of Harmon's face filled Reston's view as he lost grip of his senses. Sight and sound started to merge together in his mind as the darkness engulfed him.

How can I be dead, Reston? Thanks to you, my body may no longer be breathing, but as long as this program exists, I'll never die. In fact, you've now given me a new lease on life. Through you, I now have access to the outside world. I can go anywhere I want. Anywhere the network will take me. I think I'll start with your ship. And your Captain. Then, who knows?

"You can't do that. The neuroptics are a one-way interface. Programs can't just jump across."

You're right, Reston. The neuroptics prevent that. That's why I need to turn them off. And you with them. Goodbye, Reston. The time has come for your deletion.

Reston's body stiffened as he felt a massive seizure grip his body. His back arched and lifted his body above the chair. After a few seconds, the seizure released him and his body slumped back into the seat. The memory chip slipped from his fingers, quietly dropping to the carpet.

The End

Mike Loos is a husband and father of two who lives in Phoenix, Arizona. Apart from family and his writing, Mike's interests include software development, hiking, sports, music and training for triathlons. Along with his fiction pursuits, Mike is a regular contributor to a Christian e-zine called CCV Fusion that deals with current issues and events.

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a blade of field grass dangled limply from his mouth. He held a ball in his right hand that he tossed, casually, to himself as he strolled across the infield. A tattered glove hung loosely from his left wrist. With a tip of his crooked cap, he acknowledged the Big Man.

The Big Man smiled in return. "So, we about ready?"

The Shadow nodded. "Less'n you decided you got somewheres' else you oughta be?"

The Big Man's smile broadened as he approached the plate. "Friend, this is where I was born to be."

The Shadow moseyed across the infield and approached the edge of the mound. "Me too, fat-man," he said, "me too."

The Big Man watched the Shadow lazily kick at the dry, crusty dirt. The Shadow's rumpled hat was pulled low over his dark eyes, but the Big Man could see the blade of grass shifting from one side of his mouth to the other. Then the Shadow turned and slowly raised his head. As they stared at each other across the sixty-foot expanse, the autumn air thrummed with magic. And it was clear: both were, indeed, meant to be there.

"Three pitches?" the Big Man asked, digging first his left foot—his back foot—then his right, into the ossified batter's box.

"Three pitches," the Shadow agreed, grinding the weathered ball into his leather mitt. "Don't worry none, fat-man, theys'll be strikes."

The Big Man laughed. "Don't you worry," he said, "even if they're not, it won't matter."

For the first time the Shadow smiled freely, and the dazzling white of his teeth shone like pearls.

Then the smile faded and he stepped back onto the mound. The ball in his mitt, he held both between his knees while he spat in his large, wiry hands. He rubbed them firmly before he settled the glove back into place.

At the plate, the Big Man chomped on his cigar and took a single cut. Then he drew his bat back and waited.

For an instant the two men locked gazes. The Shadow leaned in. Behind his back, the ball flopped and twirled like a live thing.

Then it settled.

Everything settled.

And at the last instant, just as the Shadow hinted at delivering, the Big Man stepped out.

He calmly turned his back as the universe breathed a sigh of relief, and the Shadow cursed under his breath. Oblivious, the Big Man gently, reverently, pulled the big cheroot from between his teeth. He blew a gentle plume of smoke into the October air and stared at the glowing cigar. Then, with regret, he slowly butted it on the backstop. A tug of his pants and a twist of his cap, and he turned again, to face his adversary.

This time, there was no smile. He dropped his bat between his legs and reached down to gather some loose dirt in his palms. He rubbed them together, gently, a holy man performing a sacred rite. Dust and dirt scattered away like sand through a broken hourglass. Then, collecting his bat, he ground his ham-like hands around its timeworn grip. The Big Man tapped the plate, a square block of wood, chipped and stomped into place, and once again dug into the batter's box. With a nod, he indicated he was ready.

This time the Shadow stepped down. The spindly southerner circled the small mound twice, muttering incoherently to himself.

The Big Man heard the Shadow belch, watched him brush the dust and dirt from the

wooden rubber and grind it into the ball. Then, with a deep breath, the Big Man watched the Shadow turn.

From his vantage point atop the dusty clay mound, the Shadow was like a raven, his midnight eyes boring holes through his prey.

In the batter's box, the Big Man held that gaze; more, he welcomed it, challenged it.

They shared a nod, the Big Man and the Shadow. Once more, the universe grew still.

In the one-hundred-and-forty-year history of the game, no fastball ever covered sixty-feet-six-inches in less time than did that first pitch. It struck the rusted-out backstop like a cannonball. The resounding clang cut across the lonely ball-yard, out into center field and beyond, where those select few who truly cherished the game might have imagined hearing the faintest echo of something infinitely special.

The Big Man let the pitch pass calmly, only lifting his head to breathe deeply, as though in some arcane fashion he drew strength from the burgeoning autumn. Then he stooped with a groan, picked up the ball and gently tossed it back.

The Shadow snatched it from the air with a smile. "That's one," he said.

The Big Man nodded.

A brief pause and the Shadow went into his delivery. His arms and legs were everywhere at once as he threw, as though the act of pitching caused them to multiply. Then, from somewhere magical, he all at once had the ball and all at once released it.

The second pitch, impossibly, travelled faster than the first.

But this time the Big Man swung.

His swing was prodigious, the stuff of myth and legend. A quick step forward, a lightning-shift of his hips, and the bat uncoiled from his massive shoulders in a broad, arc-light of power.

The ball exploded off his bat like something contemptuous. It sailed high and far, so very far, a wounded, defeated thing. The sound of the collision reverberated through the autumn air, reached outward toward the shattered fence and beyond, into the distant heart of the city, where those select few who loved the game imagined that their windows shook, ever so slightly, as though God Himself had crushed one over the walls of Heaven.

The shot was, of course, foul, not even close really. But in the history of the game, no ball, fair or otherwise, had travelled farther.

The Shadow hardly took notice. He reached his spidery hand into his oversized pocket and withdrew a second ball.

"I reckoned maybe you'd get lucky and get a piece'a one," he said in his easy drawl. "And I didn't feel like chasing no foul tips."

"Good thinking." A smile lit the Big Man's moon face. "So, this is it then?"

"Yep," the Shadow said. "This's it."

And once again, for the final time, George Herman 'Babe' Ruth, and Leroy 'Satchel' Paige, locked gazes. They had gauged each other now, taken each other's measure. There would be no excuses.

The Babe dug in at the plate.

Satch dug in on the mound.

For long moments, silence reigned at Ike's ball-yard.

And then the only sound was the tormented wail of the wind, as it was ravaged by rawhide and ash.

* * *

Satch's lanky form reached far as he glided, effortlessly, off the mound. The ball erupted from his grip like venom from the mouth of a snake, weaving and dancing as it lanced toward the plate.

The Babe's swing cleaved the air like a scythe. His mighty arms rippled with power as they extended outward over the plate.

And when he struck the skirting missile from the air and sent it towering over the trees in center, it was with an almost casual air of disdain.

Neither man ever saw the ball land.

* * *

In the days that would follow, those who loved the game would know a strange, quiet peace. No one would ever explain it. It was as though, somehow, somewhere, one of life's greatest mysteries had been resolved, a truth uncovered. And it was a good thing, something that was meant to be uncovered, for the mystery was one that should never have been a mystery at all.

At the ball-yard behind Ike's Lumber Mill, where both the Babe and Satch stood staring off into the setting sun, trying and failing to follow the ball's majestic path, a quiet, too, had fallen.

Satch rubbed his right hand on his ragged pant leg as he approached the plate. His smile matched the Babe's.

"Hell of a shot, Big Man," Satch said, clutching and shaking the Babe's enormous hand. "Today, you was better."

The Babe threw his head back and the decrepit ball-yard rocked with the sound of his laughter.

"You know, Satch, no one else who's ever played this game could have hit that pitch, and I don't think I'd want to try again. I was one lucky bum, but, that don't matter because you're right; today, I was better."

With a tip of his hat and a broad smile stretched across his face, Satch turned to walk away.

"Next time it won't be so easy, fat man," the Babe heard him say as he melted into the distance. "Next time I won't bring just the heat, I'll bring the whole kitchen."

Again the Babe laughed. "I'll be here." He shied away from the thought of what a curve ball would have done to him on that last pitch. "And Satch, remember; Josh Gibson ain't Babe Ruth."

For an instant, just beyond second base, Satch paused. He seemed about to turn and speak, but, instead, threw his head back and laughed. "Don't worry, Big Man," he said amid the laughter, "I'll remember. And you remember somethin' too: Don't look back. I'll be gainin' on you."

Then the Babe watched him go. He really was the best pitcher he'd ever seen. The Babe cast one last, lingering look around the old ball-yard. In a regular game, he was sure he'd have had almost no chance of doing what he'd just done. But this wasn't a game, this was something special.

The Big Man reached into his pocket and withdrew a second cigar.

Truth. He had come seeking truth. Placing the burning cheroot between his teeth, the Big Man slung his bat over his shoulder and smiled, content in what he found.

The End

Scott is an elementary school teacher from Windsor, ON., who has taught all grade levels from elementary school through university. He is also a contributing editor to Deep Magic who lives at home with his wife (oh, yes, sorry) WONDERFUL wife and two beautiful daughters.

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